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HER FACE WAS HER FORTUNE.

VOL. II.



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HER FACE WAS HER FORTUNE.

BY

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“GRANDMOTHER’S MONEY,” “NO CHURCH,”

“LITTLE KATE KIRBY,”

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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HER FACE WAS HER FORTUNE.

CHAPTER I.

VALENTINE IS CONTRITE.

JANE GRAVES did not call her young mistress in the morning as she had promised that she would. Helena Shaldon woke up late, after much fevered dreaming, and went downstairs, recking not of the changes that a few brief hours had made in many lives about her, and were to make in hers.

There was no sign of Mrs. Graves about the house, but Helena was not alarmed. The house-keeper often kept in the background till the breakfast hour, and the young mistress had a habit of flying to the fresh air, and to all the sunshine which she could find in Weddercombe, returning

at a later hour to begin the dull, dead day. It was only in the mirror in the drawing-room that the first sign of a fresh care came to her as with a great surprise, for she had almost out-lived persecution, she thought. Only a little while ago she had seen Florence Andison in that mirror—that was the beginning of her new troubles, which might lie back in ages remote, calculating by all that she had suffered since; and here, again, was another figure for ever associated with her tribulation. It was Valentine Merrick, standing upon the lawn, and looking down at the flowers, his hands clasped together, and his face ominous and grave.

“He defies me—he insults me!” she whispered to herself, and, despite her apathy, the colour mounted to her face.

A second steady survey of him, a long study of him in her mirror, wherein he moved not, but stood rigid as the marble statues which were staring at him from their pedestals; and then, fraught with a new fear, conscious that there was a motive in his presence, she opened the French window, and descended the sloping bank of turf towards him. She had feared him much, but she was not afraid of him that day.

He did not perceive her till she was close upon him, and then the strange anguish in his face was something for her to marvel at in one who had been as hard and cold and keen as steel.

"You have brought bad news to me," she said, advancing more swiftly over the remaining portion of ground between them, "or you are here with fresh proofs of my crime, and dare me to refute them. Well, sir, I can bear all—I have grown inured to this—the worst happened long ago."

"I trust so," he said very earnestly and kindly, "and for my share in much of your present misery, Mrs. Barclay, I entreat your pardon."

"My pardon!" she said, stepping from him in astonishment—"you—ask my pardon!"

"Believing that all has happened for the best, and that my ungenerous doubts of you, my want of confidence, and my pride in my own worldly knowledge, have helped towards the vindication of your innocence, still I have acted in an unmanly fashion; and I pray you, madam, to forgive my error."

"My innocence—your error!" repeated Helena, taking a deep breath between each word

“then you—even you—think that I am not guilty of the murder?”

“I am sure that you are not.”

“It is your warm-hearted friend’s generous impulse that has extended to you, and brought you here.”

“No, madam—it is the confession of one who is guilty, and who has made the only atonement possible.”

“Some one has confessed to—the murder!” she almost shrieked. “No!”

“Yes.”

“Is it really—possible?” said Helena very slowly. “I am grateful—I think that I am very grateful—to the bearer of good tidings.”

She held her little hand towards him, and he took it in his own and bent low his head to kiss it, as cavaliers did in the old days when there was more chivalry towards the sex and less precaution. He kissed it in strange reverence, and then stood watching her furtively.

“She said that she was strangely hopeful of good news; where is she? I must run and tell her,” cried Helena, “though the news embraces sorrow and misery to some one whom I have not thought of yet,” she added sadly.

“Whom do you wish to see?”

“Jane Graves—she who prophesied that this day of exculpation would come in its own time.”

“She is away. I have been sent to tell you that——”

“That Arthur Barclay has confessed,” she cried. “Ah, he was strange last night!” she added, with increasing excitement. “You remember—you were there; he brought you with him! And Jane has gone to him! Ah, Mr. Merrick, she was very fond of him; she has known him from a boy!”

“Has it not suggested itself to you, Mrs. Barclay,” Valentine said in a low earnest voice, “that Jane Graves might, under strong temptation, have committed this terrible offence? Have you never thought of that in any way?”

“Never!” cried Helena; “no! Why—why—you do not mean to tell me that it was Jane Graves—who first——”

She staggered towards Valentine, and rested her trembling hands upon his arm, gazing with so awful an eagerness into his face that he had not the courage to tell her, despite

years of self-command and much exercise of his strong nerves.

“In mercy’s name, speak!” she said.

“Mrs. Barclay,” he began, with as much tenderness in his voice as in a woman’s, “it has become my painful task to prepare you for this shock. If I have failed, I am very sorry, but I have done my best, and I ask you to keep strong, and to remember that from all this evil good must infallibly arise. Jane Graves has made the only reparation in her power, and confessed her guilt. Last night she left for York.”

“Gone—gone—my one friend—the only one I ever had in all my life! Oh, Jane, come back!”

Had he not rushed towards her, Helena Barclay would have fallen like a dead woman to the ground, but he had been watchful, and was quick to clasp his arms about her, and to save her. * He carried her like a dead thing to the drawing-room, placed her on the couch, and rang violently at the bell, bringing in every servant of that unlucky house.

But there was no power in him or them to restore Helena Shaldon to consciousness, and

the doctor, who came later, shook his head gravely, thought the case was critical, and set at work the telegraph wires between Chingford Station and a city where good doctors flourished.

“I have killed her!” muttered Valentine, as he went back to Hernley Hall, in search of further help and womanly counsel in this serious emergency.

CHAPTER II.

FIGHTING FOR LIFE.

THERE were weeks of Helena Shaldon's life of which the stricken woman had no cognizance, and in after-time of convalescence only guessed at. They were weeks of fever, and of long, horrible dreams without a break in them—with not a resting-place for the weary mind to settle on, and the past one huge distortion, in which friends and enemies preyed upon her and each other, and all was confusion of misery and woe, mingled with discordant music and the yelling of the mad. She could remember as much as that, but the nature of the dreams she had had and suffered from, who had been her friends and who her enemies, and what proportion of her own sad past formed subject-matter for her brain's distraction, it

was difficult to fathom, as she lay one Summer afternoon, a woman stunned by many blows, endeavouring to recollect where she was, and who was the figure knitting by the window, and with a merciful quietness that she was already grateful for.

She had come back to life again, but her memory was very weak. What had happened she did not know ; what was the nature of her life she could not define ; the past was full of mist, in which bygone loves and fears were lost, and whether she was child or woman, young or old, was equally a mystery. She was conscious of the figure by the window rising and stealing towards her, with a smile that was new and strange and kindly ; and then the mist came up very thick and grey, and she drifted into it and passed on—a waif at sea that went out with the tide.

It was night when the mist cleared, and she was trying to think again ; and the face with the smile—a motherly face, with soft grey ringlets hanging about it—was not so strange as when she had seen it first. It was bright day when she could speak, and when she called the lady “mamma,” a voice very soft and gentle in

her ear bade her say no more, and whispered she must rest. There were long days of resting after that, and much secret struggling with her memory, and greater wonderment with her greater strength of observation concerning her untiring nurse.

Then there followed strength of memory of a certain kind, and a secret keeping of it back so that she should know more, and learn more of the past and what had left her thus low. There ensued also little dialogues with the gentlewoman about the trifles of the day, and the events of the sick-room—full of events to her in her new life—but nothing more, till one Sunday afternoon, when she had stored up much questioning, and needed many answers. She was sure that it was Sunday by the church bells ringing—they were going to afternoon service in the old church; she had never missed that service since she had been at——

“What place is this?” she asked.

“Hush! not so loud, dear. This is home—your home. Don’t you remember?”

“Downton Vale?” she said, with a strong shudder.

“No—Weddercombe.”

“Ah! yes, I know now. And this is my room, and there’s the mirror that matches the mirror in the drawing-room down-stairs, only it was my fancy to divide them: I have been a woman of strange fancies, madam.”

“No matter, Helena. The fancies have all vanished.”

“Am I getting better?”

“Yes; rapidly, they say.”

“And I may talk now.”

“A little—to me.”

“But are you not Jane Graves?”

“No,” was the slow answer.

“It is only Jane that has a right to nurse me when I am ill. How jealous she will be when she finds you here!”

“There, there—you must not say any more to-day,” said the grey-haired lady; “I have my orders, and I dare not disobey them. You would not like to hear that I had been scolded for letting you talk too much.”

“No,” said Helena, with child-like simplicity; and she was as a child in those early waking days, and to be reasoned with in child-like fashion. “I should not like that. But—will you tell me who you are that takes *her* place?”

The lady hesitated. She was a handsome lady, with a fair bright old face, as if cut out of Dresden china, and which matched well with the silver of her hair.

“I am a friend, and have been asked to come here. You wouldn’t know my name if I were to tell you, I dare say—and I cannot tell you till to-morrow.”

“Why not?”

“I shall have to ask permission of the doctor.”

Helena said no more, but the cautious lady was conscious that the sick woman lay and watched her closely, before she fell off into one of those deep calm slumbers which had been at last her restoration.

In the early night, when the blinds were down, and a wax candle lighted on the dressing-table, the old lady saw that the dark eyes were once more fixed thoughtfully upon her, and that they followed her wistfully when she walked across the room. At a later hour still the faint voice startled her.

“I think that you should be Mr. Merrick’s mother,” whispered Helena.

“Oh, my dear child, how much better you are !” cried the lady, hastening to the bed, and look-

ing at her anxiously. "What made you think that—guess that—so clearly? I am very glad."

"You are like him—it is the same face, but not so stern and hard."

"You remember him, then?" Mrs. Merrick asked, a little nervously.

"Yes—well. I am trying to recollect when he came to Weddercombe, and what he came for."

"Don't try now, please," said Mrs. Merrick, anxiously—"we must have no further explanations to-night. They are of no use—there will be ample time, my dear, to-morrow."

"But——"

"Only remember that my boy Valentine—that is, the Mr. Merrick of whom you speak—is your staunch friend for ever; that when you were first taken ill he sent for me—placed me here as the most fitting to take charge of you, and to tend you as a dear daughter of my own—to keep you at rest and free from anxiety, which I must do, for all sakes. So trust me, and don't think again. My little child—whom I want to set upon her feet again—will reward me for my care by her obedience. Don't think again to-night."

“Very well. May I call you ‘mamma’? I did when I came back to myself.”

“Ay, Heaven bless you!—if you will—if it seems natural, as it did when you were first conscious. ‘Mamma’ let it be. If my little Mary had lived—she died when she was young—she would have been your age exactly, and—oh, the comfort to me!”

The latter part of this was not uttered in a loud tone, and was not intended for Helena’s ear, but the sick girl said,

“Is not your son a comfort to you?”

“A good son in every way, Helena—an honest, straightforward, honourable gentleman, of whom my mother’s heart is full and very proud, but of whom the world sees much and I but little. That is the fate of mothers.”

“Cannot he keep away from the world?”

“The world makes much of him, and his work is in the world, away from me.”

“Is he a clever man?”

“Very clever,” said the mother, with the utmost confidence—“astonishingly clever, bless him!”

“Is he——”

“Not another word to-night,” said Mrs. Mer-

rick, with decision—"not another word, upon my honour as a lady! You have drawn me out, Helena, and I could talk for hours about my boy, and forget that you require rest, and not a garrulous old woman for companion. I am quite ashamed of myself—I am indeed."

When Helena dropped off to sleep, the lady sat and mused upon the closeness to the truth of Helena Shaldon's questions, and knew that in a few days all must be told and all prepared for. The mind was gathering strength to grapple with hard facts, or to sink beneath them, according to Heaven's mercy or wise judgment.

She wrote a letter to her son before she went to sleep that night, apprising him of the news, by which act it is plain that time had drifted by considerably, that the Hernley holidays were over, and Valentine Merrick was back in town fighting many battles for his clients, with scarcely time to think of Florence Andison.

Still he found time for that, or for his mother, or for what he considered his duty, or for goodness knows what other reason; for the first train that reached Chingford two days afterwards brought with it Valentine Merrick, without a

scrap of luggage. He went straight to Weddercombe, employing a close fly of a rickety construction, that he found at Chingford Station, and gave an extra fee to the driver to "put the steam on," as he phrased it—a proceeding that enriched the driver, but nearly killed the horse, which, however, was not the driver's property. Valentine was whirled into Weddercombe in fine style, and his mother came hurrying down to take him to her bosom and kiss him, like the mother's boy he always had been, and to express in one short breath her pleasure at the surprise he had given her, and her regret that he had not informed her of his coming.

"It's a flying visit, mother; I have not many minutes to stay—that is, not a great many minutes. I must be back in town this evening. How is she? What more has she said? What does she know? What doesn't she know?"

"My dear Val, I can't answer without a moment's reflection," said his bewildered mother; "but she knows all."

"When was she told?"

"Last night."

"She remembers everything?"

"Everything."

“And the result? Does she think that it was through my intermeddling? Does she hate me very much? Will she ever think me anything save the brute and ogre that I was?”

“She has not mentioned you since.”

“Ah! that’s a bad sign.”

“She has been very thoughtful—she is resigned to all, she says; but it has been a heavy shock to her.”

“She’ll be killed amongst the lot of you!” cried Valentine. “I wish that I had stopped to tell her myself—I wish that I——If she dies, I shall not know a happy moment again—by Heaven, I shall have been her murderer!”

“My dear boy, I don’t see any necessity to go on like this,” cried his mother.

“All right,” said Valentine, thus reproved; “I’m composed now. But this poor woman, so sadly tried, so miserably and disgracefully hunted down, is on my mind, and I am answerable for all that happens.”

“She may recover.”

“May recover!” shouted Valentine. “Great Heaven! then she is much worse? You have marred all by your precipitation. I felt that something was wrong as I came on to-day.”

He paced up and down the room strangely excited, and his mother watched him in mute amazement. Presently he caught sight of the wistfulness in the full grey eyes before him, and stopped.

"I tell you that this Helena Barclay is on my conscience, mother," he said. "I was over-wise and over-righteous, and so crushed her. If she dies, she will haunt me—I shall see her white face and big dark eyes gleaming from the darkness at me. I was an unmerciful hound. I ——What time do you expect the Doctor?"

"He is upstairs now."

"I am glad of that."

He sat down and waited patiently for the Doctor's coming, staring at the carpet meanwhile, and opening and shutting his hands in a spasmodic fashion, that was out of place in a man usually cold, observant, and unimpressionable.

When Doctor Dimsford entered the room, he sprang up suddenly, and frightened the gentleman several paces backwards.

"How is she? What do you think of her?"

"Ah! Mr. Merrick, the gentleman whom I had the pleasure of meeting at Hernley some

weeks since! I hope you're well? If you are going to the Hall, I can——"

"Never mind that," said Valentine, rudely; "tell me how your patient is."

"I am sorry to say that she is not so well. She is perfectly conscious, perfectly rational, and remembers everything; but the news has been too much for her."

"That's your fault, mother," cried the ungrateful son.

"My dear, what could I do?" cried Mrs. Merrick, wringing her hands. "She would have died with anxiety if——"

"Doctor Dimsford, will she recover?" asked Valentine, turning to the physician. "You can speak candidly to us; we are not related to her—not her friends, to whom the truth would be a severe blow."

"The malady is conquered. Whether she will recover from the exhaustion that succeeds it is a difficult question to decide."

"But you think——"

"That she will not!"

There was a pause. Mrs. Merrick raised her hands despairingly, and then spread them before

her face. Valentine looked sternly and steadily at the Doctor.

“You know the story of—of all this?” he said.

“Yes, poor woman!”

“And of my share in it?”

“Yes.”

“Would it excite her very much to see me?”

“My dear sir, I——”

“I will be very patient—I will only say a few words, and not distress her in any way,” Valentine pleaded. “You may rely upon my discretion.”

“If she has no objection, I——”

“Mother, will you ask her?”

Mrs. Merrick stared at her son, and then went from the room, and upstairs to the bedside of the patient. Helena was lying looking at the light beyond the window, where the tops of the waving trees were bending with the breeze without. How the face brightened as the new friend came between her and the prospect!

“What a time you have been away!” she murmured.

“Does it seem so?” answered Mrs. Merrick. “I have been talking to my son, who is downstairs.”

"Is he?" she said, thoughtfully.

"He is going back to London directly," said the other. "He would like to see you for a moment, if you do not mind, and it will not excite you. If you think that——"

She paused, and waited for Helena's reply, without finishing her second question, and it came without a moment's hesitation.

"Yes, I should like to see him," was the answer. "He would not excite me in the least."

Mrs. Merrick went downstairs again, and left Helena to prepare for the interview. But Helena lay very still and calm, as though the coming of Valentine Merrick were not likely to unnerve her. There was a little womanly effort to raise her hand to her head, and smooth back her braids of hair, and thus render herself, in her own opinion, more presentable; but the strength was lacking even for that, and the hand fell back upon the coverlet, a fragile thing of beauty, cut in alabaster.

Presently mother and son entered with cautious footsteps, and she smiled a faint welcome as they advanced towards her bed.

"It is kind of you to let me see you," said Valentine, as he approached.

“Ah! I am not very much afraid of you now,” she said, as he touched her hand almost reverently.

“I only hope, Mrs. Barclay, that you have forgiven all the harm and wrong I did you in my ignorance and pride,” he murmured.

“I have nothing to forgive,” she whispered back. “You had a right to think of Florence Andison—she was everything to you.”

“No, no; I was wrong.”

“Let me forgive you freely, then, Mr. Merrick, even for the sake of the true friend who has taken care of me so long.”

She looked at the mother and smiled again. There was a look of heaven in her smile—nothing of earth, thought Valentine, and she would die.

“Dear Floy,” she said suddenly, “I hear that she is very anxious to see me. I think that they may let her come now.”

She closed her eyes, as though the light had been too strong, or the fatigue of talking too much for her, and the mother motioned to Valentine to withdraw. He bent his head low till he kissed the hand that lay there, murmured a few words which no one heard but herself,

and then was walking slowly away, when Helena's voice said,

"Don't go—one moment, please."

Valentine stopped, thus adjured.

"In my desk downstairs you will find a sealed paper. Will you read it, if I die, and act upon it? Will you return it to me if I live, please? And will you think of his nephew?"

"Of whose nephew?" asked Valentine, bending down his head to catch her words.

"Michael Barclay's. Poor Arthur's life has not been unlike my own, and I have been unjust to him. Try to find him—try to do some good for him."

"I will do my best," answered Valentine.

There was a movement of her lips indicative of thanks, but no sound issued thence, and the big dark eyes, wide open again, only looked their gratitude towards him. He went from the room, and his mother followed him to the corridor without.

"I am going now," he said, taking his mother in his arms; "have I done any harm?"

"I hope not. But are you any the happier for this?"

"Yes," he said, "but still about as happy as

a man can be who is answerable for her life."

"You look at this too seriously; it is not your matter-of-fact way, Val."

"No, it is not."

"Are you going to Hernley now?"

He looked at his watch.

"I shall hardly have time; and," he added, "I am scarcely in the mood for fine society."

"They will think it strange."

"Yes, perhaps they will."

"And Floy——"

"Ah! Floy—of course, I must see her, or she will write me a long letter that will take half an hour to answer; and—yes—I want to see her. To be sure. It's that Percy, and his maudlin ravings, from whom I should have been glad to escape. Has he been here?"

"He calls twice a day to inquire."

"With Florence?"

"Yes, generally with Florence," replied Mrs. Merrick.

"Don't let him see Helena—he'll burst into grief, and scare away her last chance of life. Ah! if she could only live, mother."

"I hope she will."

"She has been so desperately unhappy—not

one ray of sunshine—not one. There, if I don't start, I shall never get to Hernley, and all the Hernley pomps and vanities. Good-bye, mother—write to me every day—I shall be glad of every scrap of news.”

He hurried away, and, following his old fashion of getting to Hernley, he passed through the plantation, skirted the gamekeeper's lodge, strode over the fence, and went on at double-quick time across the park-land in the direction of Hernley Hall.

CHAPTER III.

NEW FANCIES.

VALENTINE MERRICK'S appearance at Hernley Hall was a surprise to its inmates, for Doctor Dimsford had not called with the news of the barrister's arrival. Valentine was one of the family now, and there was general satisfaction at his advent, a shower of questions as to the reason for his coming, and a shower of reproaches at the announcement that he had only an hour and a half to remain.

He answered the questions briefly, and he made an effort to laugh away the reproaches, but he was in no laughing mood, and the jests fizzed faintly, and went out like damp squibs. Percy Andison was his firm friend, now that the mystery had been cleared, but on that particular day Val did not care for his friend's company ;

he rather shunned it than otherwise. Percy would have told him the whole story again of Mrs. Graves's confession to him—of Mrs. Graves's death in prison before there was time to try her for the murder—but Valentine would not listen, and, as to imparting any information about his own affairs, the idea never entered his head. It struck some of the family at last that, with so little time to spare, he would like to spend it with Florence, and one by one the Andisons melted away complaisantly, and left him with her on the lawn, as on the evening when he had first asked her to become his wife.

The two lovers walked up and down, Floy with her hands linked upon his arm, and her bright eyes looking into his own. Mentally he compared her with the sick lady at Weddercombe, and wondered if health would ever come back to her whom he had stricken down. What a contrast between this flush of life and the flickering existence of the other! Yes, Helena Barclay was on his mind. He made no attempt to disguise it from his betrothed; he spoke of her immediately that they were together.

“You must not brood upon this, Val,” said

Floy, "or, if anything should happen, it would unnerve you."

"I find that I am unnerved already," he replied; "I have been unlike myself for weeks. Two days ago, when I was at my chambers, there came to me suddenly the idea that she was dead, and I fancied that she would presently steal into the room, and take her place beside me."

"You have been working too hard at those tiresome briefs," said Florence.

"Hard work has always agreed with me," said Valentine; "it will again, now that I am not oppressed by the thought of her hate of me. How I should hate anybody who had brought me as low as she, and who had heaped upon me so much misery!"

"To think that Percy and I were right, and the acute barrister was wrong!" said Floy, endeavouring to give a lighter tone to the conversation. "We shall laugh at this some day."

"It will never be a laughing matter with me," Valentine answered, gravely; "it should not be a laughing matter with anyone. You forget the harm of it."

"Yes, yes; forgive me, Val—I only wanted

to make you smile," she cried. "But you are so dreadfully grave—so unlike your old self!"

"Does not the dangerous illness of Helena Barclay affect you, Floy?" he asked, curiously.

"Yes, very much, but not in this way."

"How does it affect your brother Percy?"

"Oh, we hardly see him; he wanders about Weddercombe like a ghost. He asks news at the house twice a day—of the servants twenty times."

"If she recovers, he will marry her."

"I hope so; but I don't think papa——"

"Sir Charles has nothing to do with it. Percy is his own master, and cannot be fettered all his life by your father's silly ideas of caste. She is fit to be a prince's wife," said Valentine, indignantly.

"That's Percy's opinion—and I don't suppose Percy will care a great deal for papa's, if Mrs. Barclay should feel disposed to say 'Yes.' And I think she will, the second time."

"Most likely," said Valentine, "if she lives, and comes back to her old strength. But there was death in her looks to-day."

"Have you seen her, then?"

"Yes; I came from London to see her."

“Not to see me! Oh, Val! Do you confess as much, and expect to be forgiven?”

Valentine Merrick did not smile at her feigned astonishment; there was no getting another smile out of his grim countenance. For ever before him was the waxen figure in the sick-room—the great black wistful eyes—the whispering music of a voice that seemed to have gone in advance of its owner to heaven, it was so far away.

He told Florence all that he had said to Helena, and all that she had answered in return, and the violet eyes were full of interest in the story.

“She will see me to-morrow, I hope,” said Floy, when Valentine had concluded his narrative. “I would have taken my share of watching with your mother, but Mrs. Merrick thought that I was too excitable and too young.”

“My mother was right, Floy,” he said, pressing the hands that rested on his arm; “when she gets better and grows stronger, then your youth, and life and light, will bring back Helena Barclay’s.”

“I hope so,” answered Florence; “I will do my best. She was a woman whom I loved at first sight, Val.”

“Ah, that was not very strange.”

Valentine Merrick went back to London, and Florence remained at Hernley, and kept her promise to her lover when, after much fitful fighting for life, Helena Barclay began slowly to mend. In a fortnight after the barrister's flying visit to Weddercombe, the news was sent to him that she was out of danger; and Val wrote a long letter to his mother by return of post, enclosing his congratulations to the convalescent. It was a letter full of the old high spirits that he had appeared to lose of late days. Helena's recovery had evidently taken a weight from his mind.

“You cannot conceive how glad, or how mad, I am, now that I am sure that I haven't killed her by my injustice,” he wrote. “I shall do something wild to-night; I shall get drunk, in all probability, as a beginning to a festive career. I am singing comic songs now over a ton and a half of papers that require counsel's opinion, and I haven't an opinion worth sixpence in my whole head.”

“He cannot mean what he says,” said Mrs. Merrick; “there never was a more methodical man when business was before him. My Valen-

tine's getting tipsy and singing comic songs! —the idea of such a thing is terrible, even in a jest! But your recovery, Helena, has fairly turned his brain."

"To think that anybody should be glad because I step back to life!" said Helena, thoughtfully; "to think that he should, of all men, or that I should, of all women!"

"My dear Helena, you have wished to die, then?"

"Yes; I could not see that it was worth any struggle to live," said Helena; "and even now what am I coming back to life for?"

"Ah! who can tell?" cried Mrs. Merrick. "For new friends, for much happiness—for him, perhaps," she added, smiling, as Percy Andison and his sister were seen from the drawing-room, where Helena was allowed to sit a little while, approaching the house.

"Oh! no," cried Helena, quickly, "that can never be. He knows that. You will never say a word of this to me again, my dear nurse and friend, and comforter."

"My dear Helena, he is a nice, sensible young man, and there is very little doubt of his extreme attachment to you. Why, Florence says——"

"Please do not tell me what Florence says," said Helena, entreatingly. "I shall never marry again. Long ago I made up my mind to that, and I wake to life again immensely strong in that conviction."

"Ah! my dear," said Mrs. Merrick, sententiously, "it is astonishing how many strong convictions of that kind I have seen shaken in my day!"

Helena shook her head, but the entrance of the visitors put an end to that topic of conversation on which women grow eloquent and men scurrilous.

The entrance of Floy Andison was like a rush of light into the drawing-room at Weddercombe, for here was a young woman who had never known sorrow, and who was going to be married to the man of her choice—in all respects a happy young woman, whom most girls would feel disposed to envy, one whom good fortune, a fair position in life, and her own way had only spoiled a little.

"Helena," cried Florence, "I have seen Doctor Dimsford this morning, and he tells me that next week you will be strong enough for change of air and scene. You are to come

to Hernley, and to go with us abroad. I have been talking to papa, and he agrees with me that—oh! it's no use shaking your head, for I have made up my mind, and I shan't stir a peg—move one inch, I mean, from my rigorous determination. There!"

"Yes, I have obtained permission to leave Weddercombe presently," said Helena, pressing her friend's hands. "I am going to avail myself of it next week."

"Very good, Helena," cried Florence, sternly; "but do you, as a sensible woman, think that you are going to shake me off?"

"You talk of going abroad," said Helena, sadly. "Foreign travel means excitement and gaiety, and I shall not care for either."

"May I ask what you think of doing?"

"I haven't made up my mind," said Helena.

"But you have some idea? Come, confess."

"Yes, I have an idea."

"What is it?"

"I haven't told anybody at present," said Helena.

"Will it include me? Try to let it include me," said Florence, eagerly.

"Your parents——"

“Oh! bother them!—I mean, bless their dear hearts! they will not say ‘No’ to anything when I say ‘I will.’ Didn’t I say, more than twelve months ago, Mrs. Merrick, that I would have Val for a lover? And he’s mine, hard and fast, from the top curl of his head to the soles of his dear clumsy feet.”

Florence rattled on in this vein for a considerable time, and amused her listeners, and her brother Percy was content to watch her, hazarding a remark now and then, and a protest against her volubility occasionally, and glancing at Helena, his enchantress, meanwhile, when he was sure that she was not looking in his direction.

“The fact is,” said Florence, as a parting shot, “I have orders from my imperious master, Valentine Merrick, to look after you, Helena—to give you the full benefit of my amiable and enjoyable society; and, as it suits my own wishes to a T, you cannot escape me.”

“Did he leave her any injunctions, or is it all a jest?” asked Helena, when the junior members of the Andison family had gone. “There is no understanding her; her happy disposition looks at life so lightly.”

"I believe that he asked Florence to call very frequently," said Mrs. Merrick.

"He who once threatened me with disgrace if I spoke to her!" observed Helena. "What a world of change it is!"

"Ah, my dear, it is."

"And presently a change once more—with you away from me, and I alone at Weddercombe."

"You will not stop here, my dear," said Mrs. Merrick; "it's a terrible place for youth."

"I shall not know where to go. This is home, though here I lost one who—oh! I daren't think yet!" cried Helena, covering her face with her hands.

"I have been thinking myself a great deal of your future," said Mrs. Merrick.

"And the result of your deliberation?" inquired Helena, looking up.

"Well, my dear, I haven't arrived at a result."

"I thought not."

"But you must not shun society again, for all your reticence," said Mrs. Merrick. "You must make friends."

"May I speak frankly?" asked Helena, interrupting her.

"Certainly."

"What do *you* think of me?"

"I—my dear!" said the old lady, amazed at this irrelevant question, as it appeared to be before the explanation followed.

"Yes; you who have known me for weeks, and have been a good Samaritan to the stranger by the wayside. Am I one whom you could learn to love—by degrees, not all at once?" she added, very humbly. "Or am I a very selfish, vain, discontented woman?"

"My dear Helena, you are all that is good and gentle."

"But not like other women; the past will never let me be as Florence Andison, or as those whose lives are little shallow streams flowing gently on to the big broad sea beyond. I am strange. I am an enigma to myself."

"No, not particularly strange," said Mrs. Merrick; "and, if your past life, or your past trouble, has altered you a little, it has not narrowed your heart, or rendered you less likely to be loved."

"And yet no one has ever loved me."

"Percy Andison."

"A romantic youth, who could love any

woman. I had forgotten that poor foolish, chivalrous boy. But you—could you love me a little, and in good time?”

“Don’t you think I love you a little now?” asked Mrs. Merrick, taking her hands in hers.

“Heaven knows—I don’t,” murmured Helena.

“Then let me assure you that I do, and a great deal too,” said the old lady. “Do you think that I could have nursed you all these weeks, known your trouble, seen your patience, and not have had my old heart drawn towards you?”

“I am glad of that,” said Helena, still retaining her hands in hers, and looking earnestly into her eyes “for I want to be grateful for that kindness, which alone brought me back to this. I want you to take care of me for ever, to let me share your life, to see in you the mother whom I lost so early, to be to you the daughter whom Heaven took away.”

“My dear Helena, you will think better of this.”

“You are much alone in the world; presently your son will marry Miss Andison, and pass away, as sons do, altogether from the mother, and then we two together might be happy.”

Mrs. Merrick was moved to tears by this appeal, but she smiled through them, and said,

“This is gratitude and affection, Helena, but your life is not likely to be narrowed to my sphere. You are young and rich, and I am old and poor, and you will soon flutter away from any home that I can offer you.”

“Try me, dear friend! Oh! take me from my own life to yours, and let me rest at last!”

“If you wish it, then—if you will make trial of the old woman here.”

“How gladly!”

So it was settled that Mrs. Merrick and Helena Shaldon should keep house together presently—the young woman believing that it was for ever, the one more old and philosophic seeing only a few months, more or less, of fair companionship, and then a separation that would leave her home more silent than it had been. Even after her promise Mrs. Merrick seemed to hesitate again.

“But I am not always alone—I like society at times—and friendly faces near me.”

“Your friends will become mine.”

“It is an experiment, Helena,” said Mrs. Merrick, “not a life-long resolution. And now

what idea of change had you in your head for next week? That foreign travel with Floy Andison did not appear to please you."

"I have a strange wish to see Yorkshire again—the old world and the old places at Downton Vale—even the old Manor-house where my husband lived—and died."

"What an odd fancy, and you——"

"And I so weak and nervous. Yes; but I am not afraid now. I feel drawn towards it before you and I settle down together; and a few miles from Downton is the sea, that Doctor Dimsford says is to make me very strong. With you and Florence Andison for friends, I feel almost strong already."

CHAPTER IV.

CHAMBERS IN THE TEMPLE.

HELENA SHALDON and Floy Andison, under the chaperonage of Mrs. Merrick, passed away one Summer morning from Weddercombe and Hernley, and went in search of health and strength and sea-air to the Northern watering-places. Sir Charles Andison had consented somewhat reluctantly to his daughter Floy's accompanying the expedition, having had plans in his head, and not caring to part with his daughter for an indefinite period. Nevertheless, having a high esteem for Mrs. Merrick, he had given his consent with easy grace, which is more than can be set down to the credit of his better half, who had a hundred objections to urge even after the party were as many miles away.

Percy Andison saw them off from Ching-

ford railway-station, and looked wistfully at the invalid when Mrs. Merrick trusted that an opportunity would be afforded him to join them in a few days ; but Helena did not second the invitation. Floy did—and it was a very kind act of Floy, for which he forgave her many past offences against his pride and his pedantry, but he would have been glad of Helena's "Yes," and he brooded for a week over her silence, after which period he thought that he would run down and see his sister !

Sir Charles and Lady Andison were both of one mind for once, and affirmed that that idea was the height of absurdity, and told their hopeful offspring so without any circumlocution ; but Percy packed his portmanteau notwithstanding, and set his face northwards.

"The fellow's getting as obstinate as a mule !" cried Sir Charles.

"He takes more after his father every day," murmured Lady Andison.

"There's not a trait in common between us," said Sir Charles.

"Oh, of course not," replied Lady Andison, ironically—"neither of you care for your own

way in the least. And now, Sir Charles, where are you going to take me?"

"I don't see any necessity to take you anywhere."

"We can't stop in this hole all our lives—we have been buried here all the London season, and the place has become unbearable."

"You never liked any place long," said Sir Charles, *sotto voce*.

"I should like to see Paris."

"I hate Paris."

Nevertheless, Sir Charles and Lady Andison left for the French capital a few days after this marital dialogue, and on their return affirmed to their numerous friends and acquaintances that they had very much enjoyed themselves.

Meanwhile, Valentine Merrick took no change of air during the late Summer and Autumn months. He was extra busy in his chambers in the Temple—he was perfectly content with his briefs, and his solitary life on the first floor of a big, old-fashioned, peaceful, dusty den in this barristers' warren, whither he came after the day's conflict to wrestle with knotty points of law. He was busy when other folk had started on their holidays, and three-

fourths of the Templars' hiding-places were left to the rats and the housekeepers. The lamp was always burning behind his window-blinds in that dreary blank of brickwork, and there were men and women who thought that Mr. Merrick never rested, and must be wearing himself out. He had at least worn out all the colour which the fresh air at Hernley had given him during his sensation holiday, but he was of tough calibre, and boasted of his staying powers, and of never having had a day's illness since he had caught the measles of young Spot at school.

He was an overworked man, but he liked overwork, and called it luck. His genius—for there was genius in Val Merrick—had brought him business, and he had not turned his back upon it because there was enough of it to crush him. He faced it, and fought with it, and resisted the temptation to migrate with the rest of his tribe. He did not require relaxation; he had had his change in the early part of the year, when he had gone wooing Florence Andison at Hernley.

He had had many letters from his mother and

Florence and Percy by the middle of October, when they had been away some six or seven weeks—many urgent requests to join them at Filey and Whitby, to all of which invitations he had pleaded urgent work. He was glad to hear of Mrs. Barclay's convalescence, of the health of his mother, of the high spirits of his betrothed, of the quiet satisfaction of Percy as hanger-on in general to the three, and he deeply regretted that it was impossible to join them. Presently they would be in town—Florence too in all probability, if her parents had not returned from the Continent—and he was working hard now so that he might be able to snatch a few hours to do them service when the ladies were at his mother's house, and Percy was off duty; and this promise contented them, though Floy and his mother entreated that he would take his work more easily for their sakes.

He was not taking his work with any particular degree of ease one night still later in October, when he had begun to think that it was time the holiday seekers were home. A few of the Templars had come back to roost at that period, and well-known faces were cropping up

in odd corners of the warren, and were encountered on dark staircases, and met in the daylight in Fleet Street.

It was ten o'clock at night, and Valentine Merrick was still busy when even industrious barristers are relaxing as a rule. He was writing out one of those opinions to which allusion has already been made, and was earning his money rapidly, if the rate at which his pen travelled over the paper might be taken as an index of calculation as to monetary value.

As he sat in the light of the strong oil-lamp which, while he bent his head, streamed upon him and his work from beneath the great green shade that left the upper portion of the room in shadow, a fair portrait of the man can be obtained.

It was a fine thoughtful countenance, full of energy, decision, obstinacy perhaps, with a massive forehead, and his hair as wild and rough as Medusa's. He had not a thought beyond the law at that moment, although there was as much inspiration on the face as if he had been composing an epic glorious enough for immortality, instead of informing his client what could be done under certain circumstances

to recover damages respecting a contract for boilers which had got mixed up with a machinery question and faulty patterns, and been delivered to order after the ship for which they had been intended had been sold to somebody else, who declined the boilers at any price, and pleaded negligence, and so forth—evidently a knotty question, which this shrewd young counsel had mastered, and was “licking into shape” before setting pen and paper aside for the night. It had been all thought out, and was at his finger-tips, when heavy feet shambling up the stairs, as strange men’s feet will do in chambers, brought him to a dead stop of attention.

They were not Mrs. Bunnett’s feet, for the worthy housekeeper’s were invariably encased in slippers, which were as invariably down at heel, and flapped during ascent and descent. Mr. Bunnett was ghostlike, and flitted about noiselessly, being a light old man of seven stone six. Master Bunnett was in bed, and the rest of the house was empty, some of the tenants having homes and wives in the suburbs, and others being away, clinging still to the fringe of their vacation.

It must be somebody for him ; and, as he had hoped to be free from visitors, he sat back in his chair, and listened dismally to the approaching footsteps.

Like most men who would dash quickly at conclusions, Valentine endeavoured to conjecture who the visitor might be, instead of waiting patiently for his approach ; and, when the clumsy footsteps slipped two or three stairs suddenly, with a hideous clattering and echoing in that silent house, he arrived at the conclusion that it was somebody drunk. Somebody drunk, who had got into the wrong house, was his next supposition as the footsteps passed his door and went up another flight, where they paused, and then began suddenly and vigorously stamping.

“ Here !—hi !—hallo, Mrs. What’s-your-name !” said a thin wiry voice that Valentine did not recognise. “ It’s as black as pitch up here. Just bring a light, or something—and look sharp about it !”

“ You’re a floor too high !” screamed Mrs. Bunnett from regions remote. “ It’s where the light is on the left. You’ll see Mr. Merrick’s name over the door.”

“I can’t see anything in this beastly place,” answered the voice. “You’d better——”

But the heavy slamming of a door below gave evidence that Mrs. Bunnett had shut herself in, and was not going to waste further time over incompetent strangers who could not make proper use of their eyesight.

Valentine Merrick left his seat and crossed his apartment to a second room, where his clerk generally attended to new-comers, and took in briefs for his master, brought by the dashing young men of Bedford Row and Great James Street. He passed from the room to a narrow passage, and to a door opening upon the broad landing-place without, not reaching it in time, however, to be spared the infliction of the vigorous application of a walking-stick upon the outer panels.

Valentine opened the door impatiently.

“Now then, what is it?” he asked, not too graciously, of the gentleman who was anxious for admittance.

Taken off his guard by this ready response to his summons, the visitor jumped back a little, and nearly went downstairs again; but he

recovered himself in time, and thereupon put the question—

“Are you Mr. Merrick?”

“Yes, I am. What do you want with me?”

“I hardly recognised you—how do you do?” said the visitor, extending a hand encased in a lavender kid glove that was thickly smeared with dust from the stairs on which he had recently slipped.

“I have not the honour of your acquaintance,” said Val, very stiffly, for the general appearance of the man was not in his favour.

“Just look at me again, please. Take a good look.”

“Certainly.”

The man put his hands in the pockets of a cream-coloured overcoat, on the left lappel of which was pinned a flower from Covent Garden Market, and set himself in attitude for Mr. Merrick’s closer inspection. Yes, Val had seen him before; his retentive memory “fixed” the intruder, though he had never exchanged a word with the man in his life, and had only seen him and his carrotty head in a far-off pew at Hernley church. He was not quite certain that the man had been drinking, but he looked

as if he had, his face being red, his hat on the back of his head, and his small eyes inclined to close altogether in his self-assumption, whilst he stood there, the object of Valentine's inspection.

"Yes, I have seen you at Hernley," said Val, in a different tone. "Do you bring news—bad news?" he added, anxiously.

"No; I have only brought myself and a friend," said the gentleman, with a short, double-knock kind of laugh. "We thought that we would look you up to-night—take you in our round, you know; we're going to see about us a bit at the West-end. Is that anything in your line, old fellow?"

Val frowned; but the inquirer was not abashed at the reception with which his familiar tone had been met. He had been drinking a little, and when he had drunk, and when he was half drunk, he was always sure that he was as good a man as anybody else. Hence he did not want anybody's airs and graces, and, even if he was capable of seeing them, he was not disposed to take them to heart.

"Who is your friend," asked Valentine, slowly, "and who are you?"

"I thought you said you knew that, just now," said the other, artfully.

"I don't know your name."

"My name is Whistleshaft—Whistleshaft, of Chingford, near Hernley—auctioneer and estate agent. Everybody knows William Whistleshaft—all the best business comes to me—every scrap of it."

"Then, Mr. Whistleshaft, why don't you stop at home along with your business, and not intrude upon mine? Good evening."

Valentine was closing the door, when Mr. Whistleshaft dived through the aperture, and narrowly escaped being cut in half in consequence.

"Here, stop a moment! Don't be in a hurry—don't be so blessed quick!" cried the auctioneer. "You don't wait to hear a fellow out—you haven't heard that I have got to wait here till my friend comes, and——"

"Who is your friend?"

"Arthur Barclay."

"Arthur Barclay—coming here!"

"He'll be with us in a moment—only you *are* in such a hurry," said Mr. Whistleshaft, in an aggrieved tone of voice.

Valentine Merrick thought for a while, and then said slowly, and even doubtfully,

“You had better come in and sit down, I suppose?”

“Thankee. That’s exactly my opinion.”

Val led the way to the room which he had recently quitted, wheeled an arm-chair towards his visitor, and sat down at his old place.

“You will excuse me,” he said, when Mr. Whistleshaft was seated, and he commenced writing forthwith.

But the charm had been broken, the ideas were off the line, and the intruder in his room was an enigma to him. He had hoped that the obnoxious individual before him would drop off to sleep in the comfortable arm-chair with which he had provided him, and leave him free to work till Arthur Barclay arrived; but Mr. Whistleshaft was wakeful, and brimming over with curiosity. He looked round critically at everything in Mr. Merrick’s chambers—at the books in the big case, the papers on the library table, the bronze clock on the mantel-piece, the *Law Almanack* on the wall, and the student sitting before him in the full light of the oil-lamp, and he finally burst forth with—

"What rum cribs you barristers have to work in! This kind of place would kill me in a week."

"Very likely," answered Val, flinging down his pen, wheeling his chair round, and facing Mr. Whistleshaft with a decision that portended his old practice of vigorous cross-examination. "And now, sir, what time may I expect the pleasure of Mr. Barclay's company?"

"Oh! he won't be long. He said that he'd pick me up here," replied the auctioneer.

"Have you any idea what is the nature of Mr. Barclay's business with me?"

"Can't say that I have exactly. I believe that he has been told to call by some of the girls in the North—you know—Miss Andison and Miss Shaldon, as she used to call herself. 'Pon my soul," he added, "that was the oddest start, take it altogether—I always thought that there was something queer about her manner. I was the agent who sold Weddercombe to her, you must know—used to visit her at first—should have got spoony on her, if I had seen her very often, so cut it."

"That was a great pity," said Valentine.

"Eh—why?"

"Mrs. Barclay is a lady of immense fortune."

"Yes," said Whistleshaft, nibbling at the end of his stick; "but then that confounded York affair."

"That has all been cleared up."

"Ah, yes—but still there will always be something about it and her, you see, despite that awful old woman's confession, which will grate with county families. Our family has been in the county close on two hundred years."

"Are there many of you about?" asked Valentine.

"Me and my sister are the only two left," replied Mr. Whistleshaft, with an amount of pathos that made amends for his grammar.

"That's fortunate," muttered Valentine.

"Why do you think that that's fortunate?" said the auctioneer, whose ears were evidently sharp.

"Have I not a right to consider it a fortunate circumstance that some of you *are* left?" rejoined Valentine.

"I have no objection," said Whistleshaft; "I thought that you were going in for chaff, and two can play at that. It strikes me that I could chaff you a bit, Mr. Merrick, about a cer-

tain young lady down at Hernley, now, eh?"

"Don't," said Valentine Merrick, with so peculiar an expression on his face that Mr. Whistleshaft didn't.

"May I ask," said Valentine, after a pause, "if you and Mr. Barclay have been long acquainted with each other?"

"About three days—not more. He's a deuced good sort of fellow, and he took to me. He's not as stuck-up as his aunt-in-law. I say—you needn't tell him that I have made any remarks about Mrs. Barclay."

"I'll take care."

"He is rather disposed to take Weddercombe off Mrs. B.'s hands, and Mrs. B. is very much disposed to let him have it, and he came from Downton—where Mrs. B. found him—to Chingford, where I am, for the key of the place, Weddercombe being shut up, do you see?"

"I am trying to understand. Go on."

"But—ha! ha!—Chingford was exactly the place where I wasn't just then," said Mr. Whistleshaft, with a knowing wink at our hero; "I was in town, seeing life and rubbing off the country dust. I always come to town once a year—it's my reaction—my fling after eleven

months hum-drum, cut-and-dry slavery and drudgery. Here I can do as I like—here nobody knows me. Down at Chingford I can't sneeze without somebody calling at the shop next day—at the office, I mean—to ask how Mr. Whistleshaft's cold is. It's infernally aggravating that, you know."

"Celebrity has its drawbacks," said Valentine.

"Nobody can get on without a change of scene—deuce a bit of that!" said Mr. Whistleshaft. "And London's my change. I can do what I like here, and nobody cares. I can take a glass too much without everybody howling about it in the streets, and the clergyman preaching at me in the pulpit. I can see life and enjoy life, and then go back to Chingford as smug as anybody else."

"I have no doubt you can. But this Mr. Barclay? What made him take to you?" said Valentine, wonderingly.

"Well, he's a trifle wildish just now—he's having his fling too, I suppose. We're birds of a feather, and I show him about town, and let him see that we're a cut above Yorkshire folk, and so on. He's a deuced queer temper," he added, in a lower tone, "but I manage him—

give him his head when he's dead set on anything, and let him go. When he gets down to Weddercombe we shall be fast friends; and there'll be the hunting and shooting again, as in Colonel Chester's time."

"Did you visit Colonel Chester?"

"Well—n—no—not exactly. But he couldn't keep me out of the hunting-field, though he tried, the old rascal! He called me a confounded, prying, intermeddling snob once, and I was thinking of entering proceedings for libel when he died. Good job I did not, though, for his relatives wouldn't have put the estate into my hands to sell for them, and I made a very handsome commission out of it. It strikes me, Mr. Merrick, that you haven't much air in this place—I feel awfully hot and thirsty."

"The windows are open, and there's a public-house in the next street," said Valentine.

"I'll wait here for Barclay, if you don't mind," he said, settling himself more comfortably in the arm-chair, and half closing his eyes at last.

Valentine did mind, but he uttered no objection. The man must stay. He (Valentine) was curious about this Arthur Barclay—this rugged nature of which he had heard—this being con-

cerning whom Helena had been anxious, and whom she had even entrusted to his care when she thought that she might die. Helena Barclay had suspected her husband's nephew of the murder, as he had suspected her, and the revelation of Jane Graves had made them friends perhaps. He was to have the estate, and she was coming to live with his mother, and many changes within the last few months had arisen from Helena's sojourn at Weddercombe.

But no change appeared to have done Arthur Barclay any good, if William Whistleshaft's account was to be taken for gospel. Arthur Barclay was as wild and reckless as report said that he had ever been, and this hypocritical, conceited, half-cunning, semi-idiotic prig he had already constituted his companion. What did Arthur Barclay want with him? What had happened at Downton Vale that Helena should have sent Arthur to the Temple at this hour of the night?

He could not imagine; he could only wait. He had grown heartsick of Mr. Whistleshaft's discourse, and he turned to his work to avoid it; he had heard sufficient to guess at Mr. Whistleshaft's character, and that gentleman's further

conversation was objectionable.. Mr Whistleshaft had not this opinion himself, and continued to talk in a lower key and with a thicker utterance, until he dropped off into a heavy sleep, like a man tired out with his pursuit of "life." He had been a long while making up his mind to it, but, once off, he slept profoundly and snored with forty-horse power, his head hanging over the side of the chair, and his mouth wide open, showing his big flat domino-like teeth.

"If Arthur Barclay does not come, what shall I do with this cad?" said Valentine, looking round at Mr. Whistleshaft half an hour afterwards; and almost at the same moment the echoes of the house were reverberating once more to footsteps coming with a thunderous noise up the broad stairs.

"At last," said Valentine, as the iron knocker was set in motion with the same disregard as Mr. Whistleshaft had shown for the nerves of the occupant on the inner side of the door. Mr. Whistleshaft slept on peacefully; he was dead-beat with the drink and restlessness of that second life to which no one in Chingford

dreamed the smooth-shaven Mr. Whistleshaft capable of succumbing.

Valentine opened the door of his chambers and admitted Arthur Barclay.

CHAPTER V.

THE KEY ON THE WATCH-CHAIN.

VALENTINE was relieved in mind at discovering Arthur Barclay to be sober, or at least to be a man who by every outward and visible sign presented the aspect of sobriety. If he had been drinking at any period anterior to his visit to the Temple, the effect had worn off, or else he carried his drink like a gentleman. His step was steady, his eyes were bright, and it was only by his gloomy, even sullen, expression that one guessed that there was something wrong in his head or at his heart. It was the face of a man dissatisfied with himself or the world.

“Good evening,” he said, not too ceremoniously; and Valentine said good evening in return, and then led the way to the room wherein Mr. Whistleshaft was sleeping.

"Oh, he's here!" said Arthur Barclay, with a disparaging look at the sleeper. "He's a man of business, and keeps good time, if not good company."

"A great friend of yours he tells me," said Valentine.

"I have no friends—I am not likely to make them, Mr. Merrick," was the abrupt reply; "years ago I gave up the effort as a failure."

"Why?"

"There was too much of the fiend in me; and yet, though I have suffered injury and borne with calumny enough to become a fiend in earnest, I have seen enough of late days to tame even me."

"Enough trouble you mean?"

"Yes, enough trouble," was his answer. "A few weeks back I could have sworn that that old woman's death would have made a better man of me—set me thinking, made me feel less the outcast that I have been. But—no. It all came back—the old thoughts and temptations, the old recklessness that carries me away, and leads me to pick up such a thing as that for a companion, because honest men and women will have none of my acquaintance. 'Brute Barclay'

they called me down in Yorkshire, and, by Heaven, it was not a bad name !”

He sat down in a chair by the side of a table, and looked at Valentine.

“But you’ll be glad to hear my business, and shut me out again,” he added. “I am not in the habit of maundering like this—only I have been drinking all day, and have been waiting to come to myself before I called on you.”

“Drink has not done you any good—why do you fly to it?”

“For forgetfulness of all the harm I have caused,” was the quick answer.

“Better try to make amends for it,” said Valentine quietly.

“Ah, it’s too late,” he shouted, his eyes blazing again with lurid fire. “I helped to kill that old woman by my ingratitude. Her heart had been bound up in me once—it was my career that urged her on, and brought about my uncle Michael’s death; she is a dead weight on my soul—a something that will never go away.”

He struck the table in his violence—certainly he was a man of little self-control—and this time Mr. Whistleshaft writhed uneasily in his chair, opened his eyes, and blinked several

times at the two men sitting at the table.

“Oh, you’ve come,” he said at last; “blest if I didn’t think I was at Chingford, knocking down property by wholesale. What’s up now?”

“Nothing,” said Arthur Barclay; “sit where you are, and don’t interfere till you are asked. I am just in the mood for kicking you out of the room.”

“Thankee,” said Mr. Whistleshaft drily; “then you may rely upon my being particularly quiet.”

He crossed his arms on his chest and closed his eyes again, affecting to sleep, but opening them suddenly and shrewdly at times, and in a manner that was significant of his ears being open to match.

“Before Jane Graves surrendered herself to the authorities at York, she gave me the key of her box—a big black oaken box, that I remember years ago at Downton Vale. Here is the key.”

He opened his coat, and Valentine saw that a long bright steel key, of a peculiar shape, was hanging at his watch-chain—an odd ornament to set by the side of a spade guinea.

"There are papers in the box of importance," said Arthur, "she says so—and she was always a sharp woman. They concern Helena Barclay and myself, and we are to open them together. They relate to the dark old times when Michael Barclay lived."

"Did she tell you what they contained?"

"Not a word."

"Well?"

"Helena and I met for the first time without hating each other at Dowton Vale, and I told her of the key. On the first of November she will meet me and you at Weddercombe."

"Why should I be there?"

"She wishes it. She will have no more secrets—she can trust you, she says—and there may be something in those papers which will require your opinion as a barrister and your presence as a witness. I believe," he added, drawing a letter from his breast-pocket, "that she puts it there as a favour."

"I have done her too much injury to refuse any wish of hers," said Valentine, taking the letter from Arthur Barclay's hand.

"Yes; you were in the wrong, like me," muttered the other.

Valentine opened the letter of which his visitor had been the bearer, and read the few hasty lines penned in a fair Italian hand. They were expressive of her wish that he should be present at the opening of the box, of her fear that a new trouble might be on its way towards her, and that with poor Jane Graves's death there had not ended all misconception and distrust. "I should wish you to be present, if it be possible to come to Weddercombe," she added, "so that the son of the dear friend whom you sent in my affliction may not distrust me again."

She had not intended to convey a reproach in her letter, but he felt that there was one, and he knew how cruelly he had suspected her only a little while ago. He read that paragraph aloud to Arthur Barclay.

"Shall you see Mrs. Barclay before we meet at Weddercombe?"

"No," said Arthur, shaking his head moodily ; "it is not likely."

"You are friends?" was the quick inquiry.

"There is nothing that should make us enemies ; she is a generous and good woman.

But then I am all that is bad, and we are afraid of each other."

"How is that?"

"Why did you ask me if I should see Mrs. Barclay before the first of November?" he inquired, without replying to Valentine's question.

"I would desire you to give her this message—that there is nothing in the world calculated to rouse in me now, even for one instant, a single atom of distrust."

"You could have written that without constituting me your messenger," said Arthur shortly.

"I would prefer your saying it—you who have distrusted her as bitterly and unjustly as I have."

"And as she has distrusted me," added Arthur Barclay; "you forget that I have been one of the sufferers."

"You bear no malice? You were a man strong to resist; she was only a weak woman. She was tried for murder, and saved from the gallows by an accident."

"Yes, you are right," said Barclay; "and I am a fool to complain. I always was a fool; dissatisfied with the world's opinion of me, and

yet making no effort to gain its confidence. I never had a chance to do well—not one chance!—and this is the result.”

“This should be the beginning of a better life, not the result of past error, Barclay,” said Valentine, becoming interested in the man’s restlessness.

“I thought so, when I took that desolate woman to York,” said he, in reply. “I fancied that then the change would come or never, and that I might become a burning light of reformation,” he cried, scoffingly. “I went to my uncle’s home, and tried to look in the face those who had long ago given up all hope of me. The old idle crew came round to shake hands, but those who had been afraid of me all my life spread the bad news in Downton Vale that Brute Barclay had come back, and honest people must be wary. I gave up—I saw the folly of it then—and laughed at my own weakness. I cried over it—I swore over it—and then I became more natural; and here I am, none the worse, and—none the better.”

He thrust his hands into his pockets, and sat and stared before him with that old moodiness of expression which was peculiar to him. The

barrister studied him, peering under the broad shade of his lamp, and trying to gauge the depth of the strange, soured disposition, as he had tried professionally at many men's characters before that day.

"Have you followed any profession?" Val asked.

"No," was the short answer. "I never liked work. I never expected to work. Until my uncle married, and cut me out of his will, I looked forward to two hundred thousand pounds."

"You are young still," said Valentine. "It is difficult to guess at your age, but you're not more than thirty, I should say."

"I am six-and-twenty."

"My own age exactly. Then——"

"Do you think that I have come here for a sermon," said Barclay, starting up, and frowning at the barrister; "or that I am going to listen to your preaching? What are you to me? You are no friend of mine."

"I might be, if you would let me," said Valentine, remembering Helena Barclay's last words, and yet wondering at his own offer the instant afterwards—an offer from one who had

no time for new friendships, and who neglected the old terribly.

Arthur Barclay regarded him with surprise; for an instant there was a rapid working of the muscles of the face, and then a scornful laugh rang out for his answer.

"I should soon disgust your respectability," he said—"soon hear from you that my ways were not your ways, and that for your good name's sake you had found it necessary to drop my acquaintance. No, no—genteel young men are very much out of my line. This is more in my style. Here! Are you coming?" he shouted in Mr. Whistleshaft's ears, as he gripped that gentleman by the shoulder.

"Oh! don't! Yes, I am ready," Mr. Whistleshaft said, rising from his seat, and rubbing vigorously at the part on which Arthur Barclay had laid his heavy grasp.

"Do you think I can stay all night for you?" Barclay asked, roughly. "Good night, Mr. Merrick."

"Good night," said Valentine. "We meet at Weddercombe on the morning of the first of November."

"Ay—if we live as long," he added.

He strode to the door, at which he stopped once more to consider, turning with a suddenness for which Mr. Whistleshaft was unprepared, and coming down on the auctioneer's favourite corn, which the London stones had kept for the last few days in an incessant state of throb.

"Thank you, Mr. Merrick, for hinting at the possibility of my becoming your friend," Arthur Barclay said; "but you don't know the desperate character with whom you would have to deal. It was a fair offer though, and I should have declined it more gracefully had I drunk less to-day."

He held out a big hard hand, which Valentine took, and it closed upon the barrister's with a vice-like grip that told of the strength that was in the man.

"I suppose, though, it was for Helena Barclay's sake, and not for mine," he said, releasing the hand from his grasp. "I am a kind of nephew, and a hanger-on of the family. You are interested in the rich, young, pretty widow."

"Yes, I am interested."

"Are you going to marry her?" he asked, quickly. "Is it understood between you two already?"

"No," was the monosyllabic response, Valentine objecting to the leading nature of the question, and feeling annoyed at it, for all his grave composure.

"You are drifting that way—she is going to live with your mother, she writes you confidential messages, and requires you as a witness and general adviser," he said, satirically—"and," shrugging his shoulders, "she is immensely rich."

"Good night," said Valentine, quietly.

Mr. Whistleshaft took this opportunity to clap his hand familiarly on the broad shoulders of Arthur, and to scream with laughter at him.

"You're a terrible ass, Barclay," he cried. "By George, you are one of the biggest fools and muddlers I ever knew! Why, Merrick is engaged to the nicest girl in——"

Arthur Barclay did not wait for the explanation, being naturally impatient and irascible; he turned upon his familiar friend a face purple with the sudden passion that suffused it, caught him by the neckcloth, and shook him like a dog.

"You cur, I'll throttle you!" he cried. "I'll shake the life out of your wretched carcass if you say another word!"

There was not a possibility of Mr. Whistleshaft's uttering another word with Mr. Barclay's hand at his throat ; and hence the threat was superfluous and ironical. The auctioneer kicked and writhed, and made spasmodic clutches at various portions of Mr. Barclay's attire, but he was helpless in his grasp.

Valentine was afraid that matters would be carried too far, and the auctioneer be choked off-hand, but, as he advanced to interfere, Arthur Barclay released his hold, and his victim slid in a sitting posture to the floor.

" Oh lor !" ejaculated Mr. Whistleshaft, " I think I'm dead ; I—what a villain the man is !" he muttered.

Arthur Barclay opened the door and slouched downstairs, without paying any heed to his comrade. Outside the block of ugly brickwork he came to a full stop and waited patiently for Mr. Whistleshaft, who in the course of five or ten minutes came down the stairs cautiously, and evidently the soberer for the shaking that he had had. Catching sight of Arthur Barclay standing in the doorway, he seemed disposed to retrace his way upstairs once more, and claim the interference of the barrister on his behalf,

but he altered his mind, and advanced cautiously and cringingly towards his companion.

"I must say that this is particularly unfriendly," he whined forth

"Have I hurt you?" was the inquiry.

"I have got a lump in my throat as big as a cocoa-nut, already."

"Take this as a general warning, Whistleshaft, that he is a bold man who insults me," he said. "I'm sorry if I have hurt you, but a Yorkshire hand grips hard, and a Yorkshire gentleman, however much he may have deteriorated, is not likely to submit to an affront from a Chingford auctioneer. Will you try to understand that?"

"If my company is objectionable to you, Mr. Barclay, you have only to say so," said Mr. Whistleshaft, with a faint flash of spirit.

"I haven't said so—at present."

"You haven't appeared particularly charmed with it this evening," said Mr. Whistleshaft. "I shall go back to Chingford as soon as I can."

"You had better wait till I go," said the other, moodily.

"I don't fancy that I shall—I am almost sure that I shall not do that," said Mr. Whistleshaft,

with increased confidence in his resolve. "You know where to find me, Mr. Barclay. I'm a well-known man—I may say, even a popular man in Chingford; and neither I nor my business is likely to run away. I bear no malice; and, if you come to me there, I shall be glad to see you. Good evening."

"Where are you going?"

"I am going to have advice about my throat before it gets too bad. I can meet you in half an hour, if——"

"No—I'm only fit for my own company to-night," said Arthur Barclay, turning suddenly from him, and striding away in the shadow of the high brick buildings, whither Mr. Whistle-shaft did not attempt to follow him.

Yes, a wild man this Arthur Barclay, and possibly only fit for his own society, as he had recently affirmed, for he loved no man, and no man loved him. Ill-taught and ill-trained, he had degenerated from a youth that had had good attributes and noble impulses, to this; and accident had been against him, and thrust him more completely downwards than had even his own uncontrollable will. The Barclays had all been bad. His father had been killed in a brawl

after a fox-hunt; and his uncle had been worse than his father, and only his mother had been patient and good. Ah, how early that soft-eyed mother had died, and left Jane Graves to take care of him, and misunderstand him, as everybody had misunderstood him, all his life, he was sure!

He thought of all this when he was looking at the river from Waterloo Bridge, whither he had wandered after quitting the Temple. Here he stood and cooled himself in the night air, with his thoughtful gaze bent on the dark water, and the stars looking coldly down upon it and him. It was late now; the few who passed glanced askance at the burly man who lingered there, and a suspicious policeman watched him from the opposite side of the way; but no one spoke to him until an hour had gone by, when a ragged, unkempt boy passed, stopped, and then, after a moment's hesitation, went quickly and silently back on his bare toes, and pulled at the skirt of his coat.

Arthur Barclay was too deep in thought to take heed of this, until the boy asked him if he would tell him what o'clock it was.

"Just midnight," said he, after referring to

his watch by the light of the lamp close to which he was standing.

“Thankee, guv’ner. Yer couldn’t afford a trifle p’raps to a cove out of luck?”

“I’m out of luck myself,” answered Arthur Barclay.

“Lor’ sakes! if I didn’t ’spect as much, from the cut o’ yer,” said the night shadow. “What’s the row?”

“Nothing—be off.”

“All right, old bloke; but yer ain’t so werry down, with a gold ticker to the good yet. Yer ain’t got to sleep here cos there ain’t a crib under threepence in Granby Street. Yer ain’t bilked the toll-man behind a cab cos yer was too dead beat to go round by Westminster—so no gammon. And yer have had somethink to eat to-day.”

“Yes; haven’t you?”

“Strike me if I have had anything but one crust! But to-morrow’s Saturday.”

“What has that to do with it?”

“Oh! the streets are full, and one picks up something off the barrers.”

“You needn’t do that to-morrow,” said Arthur Barclay; and, to the amazement, the terrible

joy of the boy, the miracle of a sovereign was dropped into his hand.

It rendered the recipient's tongue speechless ; wealth struck its owner utterly dumb, paralysed his limbs, and took his breath away ; he fell like a dead boy against the parapet, with the sovereign clutched in his hands, as Arthur Barclay, with his old quick stride, went back towards the Strand.

In the busy thoroughfare, still full of life, with the playgoers streaming from the theatres, and those who loved the night for its darkness' sake still thick about the streets, the man without a friend in the world stopped again to consult his watch, as though time was suddenly of value to him.

It was at this moment that he became aware of a loss, and that he glared down at his watch-chain, and growled forth a deep oath in his surprise. The spade guinea was hanging to his chain still, but the long steel key that fitted the lock of Jane Graves's box, and which Jane Graves had entrusted to his care, was gone !

CHAPTER VI.

ARTHUR BARCLAY MAKES SOME CALLS.

ARTHUR BARCLAY called at Valentine Merrick's chambers the next morning, but the barrister had left early, and his clerk did not know when it was likely that Mr. Merrick would return. Would Mr. Barclay state his business? No, Mr. Barclay would not state his business; he would call again at one o'clock in the afternoon.

At two o'clock in the afternoon the burly man was at Val's chambers once more, and was informed on this occasion that Mr. Merrick had waited, at great inconvenience to himself, till ten minutes past one, when he had been compelled to go out again. Mr. Barclay would find him, however, at the Central Criminal Court, and, if his business was of importance, Mr. Mer-

rick would be able to exchange a few words with him.

Arthur Barclay glowered at the meek young man in the outer office who delivered to him this polite message from his principal, and then swore softly to himself, and cursed the punctuality and the pressure of business of the man whom he had twice called to see in vain. He found his way to the Central Criminal Court with difficulty, for London was unfamiliar to him, and to those directions which he received he paid but little heed; and it was with still greater difficulty at last that he pushed his way through policemen, ushers, witnesses, barristers, solicitors, and hangers-on in general, and found some one not too busy to discover a second clerk of Mr. Merrick's, who had been in close attendance on his master all day, and ready at a moment's notice for any emergency.

"Mr. Merrick's speaking now," said the clerk to Arthur Barclay; "he's defending a murder case, and I am afraid will be some time yet."

Another murder case! Arthur Barclay shuddered.

"I will wait."

"Would you like to go into court?"

"No, I should not. I have had enough of murder," Barclay growled forth, to the clerk's astonishment. "I'll wait here—tell him so."

The clerk nodded, and passed into the presence of Justice once more; and Arthur Barclay walked about the outer passages, and up and down the stairs, like a restless wild beast, his brow furrowing at delay. Some one touched him on the shoulder at last, and Valentine Merrick, in wig and gown, was at his side before he was aware of it.

"Well, Mr. Barclay, what is it?" asked the barrister. "I have five minutes to spare, and they are at your service."

"What a curse it must be to be overrun by business like this!" said Barclay.

"I like it—it agrees with me."

"It brings you profit and popularity, and puts your name in the paper, and all that," he added, moodily; "but it would kill me. I could not be at any man's call, compelled to calculate every minute, and never my own master, but the slave of a solicitor, or of a barrister bigger than myself."

"You haven't come all this way to tell me that," said Valentine, laughing.

Valentine Merrick had a pleasant laugh of his own, deep, rich, and resonant, totally unlike the effervescent giggles or spasmodic wrenches of hilarity which are more frequently met with than the laughs that peal forth of their own will. The muscles of Arthur Barclay's face relaxed, and, for the first time for many days past, there was a smile in unison upon his rugged features.

"No," he said. "I have come to you for two reasons. Firstly, I acted like a fool last night. I was hardly sober, and I insulted you in your own house. I'm sorry."

"We will not mention the matter again," said Valentine. "A manly apology always atones for much error. Mr. Whistleshaft is none the worse, I hope?"

"I don't know—I don't care," Arthur Barclay replied, with his old roughness predominant again. "He knew what he had to expect when he took up with me; but I forced myself upon your presence."

"And secondly?" said Valentine.

"Secondly, have you found any property of mine at your rooms?"

"Yes—two waistcoat-buttons."

"I lost the key of Jane Graves's box in that disreputable scuffle with the auctioneer, or had it stolen by a boy who asked me the time last night on Waterloo Bridge."

"No key has been found in my chambers."

"It's the bad luck beginning again, to start afresh in this way," said Arthur.

"Are you superstitious?"

"Ay, I am," was the honest confession; "I felt when I took that key from the old woman's hands that I should abuse her trust, and act in defiance of her wish. I never did anything right—it is beyond me."

"The key appeared to be of a complex pattern," said Valentine, "and the contents of the box are probably safe enough."

"I could break through the lid with a blow of my fist for that matter," said Barclay. "It is not that I fear anyone finding the key, or who would know that it fitted a certain box at Weddercombe, but that it's an evil omen, and makes me as false to the dead as I have been to the living. It's——"

"Have you asked Whistleshaft about it?"

"Whistleshaft? Why, do you suspect that——"

"I suspect nothing," replied Valentine, "but there was a little playful badinage between you at the last, and he might have picked up the key, intending to give it you this morning."

"I saw him last night outside your place, and he did not speak of it. I'll go to him," said Arthur Barclay.

He was an absent fellow, with no manners. He walked away from the barrister without another word, and, full of his new quest, slouched out of the Old Bailey and along Newgate Street, until a vacant cab came in sight, when he shouted for it with a vehemence that alarmed fourteen foot passengers, and desired the man to drive him as fast as possible to Trinity Square, Borough. It was a favourite locality of Mr. Whistleshaft's, where the auctioneer annually studied economy in the matter of apartments, taking "his fling" at as moderate an outlay as "seeing life" would permit, and being content with a little extra walking and omnibus riding in lieu of hiring rooms at the West-end of the metropolis, where people "stuck it on so!"

Mr. Whistleshaft was at home, the landlady informed him. Mr. Whistleshaft was even

found to be in bed by the visitor, who went upstairs unceremoniously, and discovered the gentleman of whom he was in search sitting up and gargling his throat.

“Hollo! are you ill?” asked Barclay, upon entering the room.

“Just a little, Mr. Barclay—nothing to speak of. A mere *bagatelle*,” said the auctioneer, in a plaintive tone.

“What’s the matter?”

“A bad throat, that’s all, sir; I shall be well in a month or two,” said Mr. Whistleshaft, with politeness. “Will you oblige me by putting that bottle of gargle on the mantelpiece? Thank you.”

Arthur Barclay followed the instructions of the auctioneer, who arranged himself with great care at full length in his bed, and drew the counterpane to the level of his chin, over which he peered with a melancholy interest at his companion.

“What can I have the pleasure of doing for you, Barclay, now that you have nearly done for me?” he inquired.

“Is it so bad as that?” said Barclay, “or are you shamming, man?”

"I'm really ill, if you must know," Whistleshaft replied, abandoning his satiric tone as totally inappropriate to the situation. "I'm at death's door, sir. If I die, there'll be an inquest, and you'll be up for murder again as sure as a gun!"

"You fool! I was never tried for murder," blurted forth Barclay.

"Ah, no!—but you might have been. It was all in the family. Don't make a row," said Mr. Whistleshaft, closing his eyes.

"Attend to me, please," said Arthur Barclay, sternly. "In that brawl at Merrick's rooms I lost the key that was hanging at my watch-chain. Have you seen it? Did you pick it up?"

"No," answered Mr. Whistleshaft, "but I think that I remember the key being on your chain."

"I should think you did. You were curious enough about it, although I was not compelled to satisfy your curiosity," said Arthur.

"I am not a curious man."

"And, now that we are on the question of keys," said Barclay, "where is the key of Weddercombe?"

“At Chingford. Do you think I came to town with the keys of all the houses that I have to let in my pocket?”

“When will you be at Chingford?”

“If I am not buried here in due course by my sorrowing relatives, I shall struggle down to Chingford as soon as I can walk to the railway-station.”

“When will that be?”

“Heaven knows! Look at my prostrate condition—see to what a state your violence has reduced me!”

“If you are in Chingford by to-morrow night, I will give you twenty pounds. If you are not, I shall break open the house.”

“You are aware that it is not your property at present?”

“Mrs. Barclay will excuse the trespass. Twenty pounds, Whistleshaft, if you are in Weddercombe to-morrow.”

“Do you go down to-morrow?”

“Yes, by the fast train.”

“I hope that I may be able to accompany you,” said Mr. Whistleshaft, with a sigh; “but I fear that moving yet awhile is an utter impossibility. What is the reason of your haste?”

“I have a reason—let that answer suffice,” said Arther Barclay.

“As you please, sir; I do not care to intrude upon your confidence. And,” he added, “as for the twenty pounds, it’s a handsome offer, and though, thank my stars, I have put money by, and can hold my head up with the best of them at Chingford, I’ll try to follow you by a later train. Perhaps,” he added, whimpering, “they can put me on a stretcher and carry me as far as King’s Cross; I shall have a mob after me, but never mind.”

Arthur Barclay stood surveying the invalid with his old moody expression of countenance, into which a certain amount of perplexity had stolen also. The loss of Jane Graves’s key was a discomfiture to him from which he could not recover. He had broken his promise to an old woman who, in confessing her crime, had sacrificed herself, so that Helena should no longer live under ban and interdict—a terrible and dangerous woman, for whom the world had had no pity, but the only one who had ever cared for him. She had trusted him at the last, and here was the result.

“Try to meet me to-morrow,” he said, at

last, "and put the expenses down to me."

"Thankee—I will," answered Mr. Whistleshaft at once.

"And think no more of this."

"Thankee—I won't—if acute inflammation of the throat will allow me to consider it a pleasant dream," said the invalid, "which I trust it may, now that we are friends again. You will not turn up your nose at me when I come down for a little shooting at your place. I am very fond of shooting."

"Come when you like," said Arthur Barclay, heedlessly.

"Thankee," said Mr. Whistleshaft, for the third time; and in a feeble tone of voice, "perhaps you'll not mind my taking a little rest now, and wishing you good day?"

"Good day," echoed Barclay, and went slowly away to the cab which had been waiting for him.

As Mr. Barclay descended the stairs, the invalid whom he had quitted sat up in bed with an alacrity which his prostrate condition hardly warranted, and listened to the retreating footsteps with extraordinary attention; and when the street door was slammed noisily, and the

wheels of the cab were heard grating in the street without, Mr. Whistleshaft sprang out of bed with a harlequin's agility, skipped to the window, and peered cautiously through the apertures of the Venetian blind. The remarkable fact was also elicited at this juncture that Mr. Whistleshaft had gone to bed in his boots and trousers, or rather had dived into bed before divesting himself of those essential articles of male attire, upon becoming aware of the visitor's arrival.

Certainly a man of eccentric habits, of keen perceptions, was William Whistleshaft of Chingford. He was a man respected amongst his brother townfolk in the little town wherein he earned a decent living, and no one in the county had ever heard a profane word or a coarse expression pass his lips; but he certainly cursed Arthur Barclay with a tolerable degree of fluency, and with a marvellous strength of language, as he watched the cab receding in the distance.

"I'll be even with you yet!" he muttered, by way of peroration; then he ran to the mantelpiece, consulted his watch, opened several drawers, dragged his portmanteau from a cor-

ner of the room, and began hastily cramming into it the contents of the drawers which he had opened. He put on his collar and stock, and his coat and waistcoat—all at once, as it seemed—and then, with his hat on the back of his head, and his face red with exertion, he dragged his portmanteau downstairs to the passage, where he paid his landlady, after a slight discussion over the items, and sent the landlady's son for a Hansom cab.

Three-quarters of an hour afterwards he was in a second-class compartment of an express train which would stop at Chingford Junction. He had caught the train by half a minute; if Arthur Barclay had had any more to say to him that afternoon, he (William Whistleshaft) would not have reached Weddercombe that night.

CHAPTER VII.

MERE CURIOSITY.

MR. WHISTLESHAFT was in Chingford as the old church clock was striking nine, and he took his sister Polly's breath away by walking into his house some five or ten minutes afterwards, followed by a boy carrying his port-manteau.

"Goodness gracious, Will, this is a surprise!" cried his sister, putting her arms round his neck and kissing him. "Why didn't you write?"

"Don't catch a fellow by the throat like that!" he answered snappishly, for Polly Whistleshaft had jarred a portion of his frame rendered sensitive by last night's shaking. "Anyone would think you had not seen me for twelve months."

"It's been very dull here all alone," said his sister.

"I don't see what there is to be dull about," her brother observed. "Give me some tea, and tell me how you have been getting on without me."

The tea was presently forthcoming, the fire was lighted in the best room to do honour to "my lord's" arrival, and William Whistleshaft, snugly ensconced in the easy-chair, listened to the petty details of his business, and took his refreshment cautiously.

"I suppose it's a sore throat you have?" said his sister, as she detected a considerable difficulty in her brother's swallowing powers.

"Yes, infernally sore."

"You don't take care of yourself in London—I'm sure you don't."

"I flatter myself that I can take care of myself anywhere," said Mr. Whistleshaft, conceitedly. "Is the gas alight in the office?"

"You don't want to go into the office to-night, surely?" exclaimed Miss Whistleshaft.

"I have a great deal of business to do, and that's why I am at home in a hurry, if you must know."

"What business?"

"Mr. Arthur Barclay will be here to-morrow."

“What! that big, nice man who called last week?”

“Yes, that big man,” replied Mr. Whistleshaft. “I don’t see anything nice in him. And, as he’s anxious to settle at Weddercombe, and go over the place, and take up a deal of my time, I must prepare for him.”

“I thought that you would have had a lot of news for me, and a present from London to give me, and——”

“Oh, don’t talk nonsense!” said Mr. Whistleshaft, fretfully. “I have had enough to do to think of myself, without thinking of you.”

“Yes, William, I am sure you have,” said his sister, drily.

Mr. Whistleshaft might have continued the conversation at a less important period; but there was business to do, as he had informed her, and he could not neglect work. He went to his office on the other side of the passage, and shut himself in until eleven o’clock, when his sister, tired and sleepy, and accustomed to early hours, looked in upon him, and asked if he was coming in to supper.

“No, don’t wait for me; I have a lot to do still,” he said. “I shan’t require any supper.

You can leave out the brandy and the cold water, and then go to bed."

Polly Whistleshaft did as requested, and went to bed accordingly, after flinging her arms round his neck in an impulsive manner again, and once more bringing the water into his eyes. After she had gone, her brother packed up his papers, locked his desk, and sat like a man waiting for something, until all was quiet in the house. It was a quarter to twelve when he was letting himself out cautiously into the dark street, and he was on his way to Weddercombe as the old clock was striking.

Yes, to Weddercombe—a place that attracted people to it on strange errands at all hours of the night; for now it was William Whistleshaft's turn to step from the common way, and make for the mystery that still hung about the place. He was somewhat of a nervous man, although he had never owned it to anybody; but he was a man at all times bursting with curiosity, and there had fallen to his lot a glorious opportunity of acquiring information that might be of value to him at a future time.

When the keys of Weddercombe had been given him, he had prowled about the house

from room to room, making an inventory that had not been asked for, and looking into every hole and corner. He had even suggested living there himself until Mrs. Barclay's return, but it had been one more of that lady's strange fancies that the house should be closed and the servants sent upon their various ways. The place that she had liked so much, and had given more than its market value for last Winter in order to secure, she turned from with almost the same feeling of dislike as that with which she had turned from Downton Vale after her husband's death. She could not associate it and home together any longer. She had begun her third life with Mrs. Merrick, and the second had closed, she hoped, as completely as the first. She had left Weddercombe in the belief that she should never return to it, but the links of the chain had not been so completely shattered but that she must perforce cross the threshold on Jane Graves's business.

Was Mr. Whistleshaft on the business of Jane Graves too, rather than his own, that he trudged to Weddercombe that night, and took those short cuts across the fields, where practicable, so that he should not be seen upon the high

road? Had the temptation come to this vulgar being that there might be in Jane Graves's box a something which might benefit him, and him alone? Papers, he knew, were there, and a hoard of money, perhaps. Old women were secretive and eccentric, and Mrs. Graves had had wonderful opportunities of making money in the house of a man rolling in wealth as her old master had rolled. He would not be surprised to find any quantity of money; and, though he would not touch it for the world, still there was no harm in looking at it, now that, by a wonderful chance, the key that had hung at Arthur Barclay's chain was in his own possession.

In last night's scuffle he had clutched wildly at Mr. Barclay's waistcoat and shirt-front and watch-chain, and the ring to which the key was attached had snapped, and left the key in his hand. That infernal brute, Barclay, had shaken him up for something, after all! He did not mind a five-mile walk to Weddercombe at midnight, at any rate. He was agent to the estate, and had a right to be there at any time, for that matter. Who was to gainsay him, he would like to know, even if he were found out?

Not that he wished to be found out, or did not take great pains to prevent it by going at a strange hour of the night, when country-folk were sleeping in their beds; but he would be busy to-morrow, and he fancied it would be much better policy to go in the dark, Chingford people being too fond of meddling in matters that did not concern them.

He was tired when he reached Weddercombe, and stole in at the front gates, and past the lodge, which was as deserted as the house. When he had left the high road, and was walking along the carriage drive under the over-arching trees, he discovered suddenly that he was less courageous than he thought he had been. He had never done anything of a burglarious kind before, and the new occupation was depressing, especially when he discovered that he had to grope his way in the darkness, and found himself suddenly bashed against a tree, which appeared to his bewildered senses—half knocked out of him as they were by contact with the trunk—to have stepped into the main path on purpose.

When he was at the front door he was so confused, that he had to sit down on the stone

steps, and spend the next ten minutes in collecting his ideas, whilst his teeth kept up such an incessant chattering that he put part of his handkerchief into his mouth to keep them apart.

“I wish I had not come,” he muttered—“I wish I had told Polly, and brought her with me—I wish that I had left it till the morning.”

He drank deeply from a brandy-flask, which he had filled from the decanter that his sister had left out for him before retiring to rest, and that put a small amount of Dutch courage into him, and set him on his legs. He had well thought out the details of this expedition, and had come provided with every necessary for the purpose; for presently he was lighting a lantern—a small bull’s-eyed portable article, that would have exactly suited the late estimable John Shepherd. In Weddercombe itself it would be of service to him, he considered, as he turned the key in the lock, opened the door, and went with a cautious and high step into the cavernous hall, which had an extremely comfortless and yawning aspect about it at that hour of the night.

He was holding the door in his hand previous

to shutting it upon his unprincipled self, and was stooping to inspect a small splinter of wood which he had wedged in between the door and jamb before his London holiday, and which had fallen as he entered—a sure warranty that all was well, and that nobody had been there in his absence—when, in his nervous clumsiness, the lantern dropped from his hand, and went clattering along the hall after its light had been extinguished by the fall.

Mr. Whistleshaft ran after it, and the heavy door, caught by the draught, banged to with a formidable noise, that might have shaken stronger nerves than the auctioneer's.

“Oh, lor! I wish I had not come, really,” he gasped forth, as he groped about on his hands and knees on the marble pavement, feeling everywhere for his lantern, discovering it nowhere, bringing that unfortunate head of his against sharp projections of wainscot and acute corners of places that he had had no suspicion were near him, and finally sitting all of a heap on the cold marble, with his hands clutching his carrotty hair, wondering what he should do, and what would become of him if he could not do anything, and he should be unfortu-

nate enough to have a fit there, all to himself.

He sat endeavouring to recover his disordered faculties, and was even re-assuring himself by degrees, when there came upon him the sudden and awful consciousness that someone was stealing by him in the darkness. He could hear soft footfalls as of some one proceeding stealthily in a direction away from him, then a pause as if the intruder was endeavouring to find out where he was, or was himself puzzled at the silence which had ensued, and finally a cautious shuffling up the broad oaken stairs leading to the rooms above.

He was sure that he was not alone, and great beads of perspiration started to his temples at the conviction. He had done a foolish thing, and would probably be assassinated for his pains. His body would not be found for several days ; there would be an inquest on what was left of him, and, if his murderer were a man of moderate intelligence, such an air of suicide would be given to the whole business, that a Hernley jury would return a verdict of *felo-de-se*, and pop him into a cross-road before he knew where he was.

Such were Mr. Whistleshaft's hasty specula-

tions as he sat in a state of collapse on the cold marble; but, when ten minutes had passed and no one had made an effort to discover him, he began to scrape together a fragment or two of self-possession. Some one was in the house, he was certain, but possibly it was some one as nervous as himself, and with as great a fear of being found there—some one who evidently had not as much right to be at Weddercombe as he had, he being a duly accredited agent for Mrs. Barclay. He might not be murdered, after all—unless it were Arthur Barclay who was the intruder, who had come down to Chingford by the same train and gone straight to Weddercombe; and that brute of course would finish him without compunction.

It took another ten minutes to realise the position in all its bearings, by which period Mr. Whistleshaft remembered for the first time that he had brought a box of matches with him, and that by lighting one or two he should be able to discover his lantern. He was even then far from certain of the wisdom of the policy of directing attention to himself, and was speculating as to the advisability of creeping on his hands and knees to the street door and

making a run for it, when a sharp, unmistakeable, and miserable mewing suggested a valid reason for the noises in the house that had alarmed him.

“A cat!” he exclaimed, “only a cat!”

He struck his lucifers, and by their momentary flare discovered that he was sitting within two and a half inches of the lantern he had been unable to lay his hands upon; he re-arranged the wick, and relighted the little lamp, and then had a spasmodic laugh at his previous trepidations.

“I ought to have known that it was unlikely there were any dishonest people in this part of the country,” he said; and the consolatory soliloquy had hardly left his lips when a door was shut with violence in a room upstairs, and Mr. Whistleshaft was not himself again.

That was another draught—the result of a window being left open somewhere—the window through which the cat had got in; but he really was not equal to this kind of thing, for all that. It was too great a strain upon his nerves. If anyone should be in the house with a taste for practical joking, it would be easy enough to scare him to death—a white sheet over the

scoundrel's head would be quite enough to settle his business now—and some people were awfully inconsiderate. He was half disposed to go home and return in the morning. Mrs. Barclay had been foolish enough to leave some valuable goods here ; she had insisted upon nothing being touched in the establishment ; and people aware of that fact might feel disposed to profit by the lady's recklessness, and quietly put out of the way any one likely to interfere with their intentions. Yes, he would go home !

His hand was already on the fastenings of the great hall door, when something rubbed against his legs, and he found that a lean black cat, struck by the amiability of his countenance, was inclined to put trust in him. This was the animal that had been the source of so much alarm and anxiety, and which the careless servants had probably left in the house. Poor puss ! He never remembered being so glad to see a cat in his life. It was a companion that brought courage to his manly breast ; he was no longer utterly alone in a wide world and a big dark house—he would proceed with his mission. Why should he not know what was in the box of Jane Graves ?

He stooped and patted the cat, and then, with his new determination strong upon him, he went along the hall and ascended with rapidity the broad stairs leading to the upper rooms, the animal following him, and evincing its affection by many friendly rubs, under the delusive idea that he had brought something to eat with him, which would be presently forthcoming.

Mr. Whistleshaft knew his way about Weddercombe; he had studied the house too intently before his departure not to know every turn of it; and he went direct to the room formerly tenanted by Mrs. Graves, after nervously peering along the shadowy corridor where the old woman had been accustomed to wander restlessly at night. He had heard a little of Mrs. Graves's idiosyncrasies from the servants after the Weddercombe household was broken up for good, and he wished that he had not heard anything about them at that particular juncture; it seemed natural to expect the housekeeper's gaunt figure to emerge from the shadows and demand the nature of his business. He had always discredited ghost stories and laughed at them, but he was perfectly certain that he should believe in the ghost of Mrs.

Graves, and die of fright at her appearance. Once again he wished that he had stopped at Chingford, although he was in the room now with the big old hair trunk studded with brass-headed nails before him, and "J. G." plainly dotted out in metal on the lid.

This room was stiller and more unearthly than the rest of the house, he was assured; it was as if the figure of the woman who had given herself up were watching him from the folds of the bed-curtains, or behind the heavy sombre damask hangings by the window, there was so strange a sense of being overlooked upon him. The old terrors came back, and the lantern shook so violently in his hand, that he was compelled to set it on the floor for fear of dropping it again. He stooped and stroke the cat, for company's sake, gave one nervous glance around him, and then from his breast-pocket produced the key which he had torn last night from Arthur Barclay's watch-chain. Let him get the job over and be gone. It was too late to retreat; he was nervous without a cause, but the time and place and nature of the errand were against his keeping cool. He would never undertake anything like this again;

he would act honestly in this instance, having been all his life an honest man !

The key fitted in the lock, and he opened the trunk and let the lid fall slowly back to the full extent which two broad strips of canvas would allow. There was an odd mixture of stuff dresses, stout-soled boots, a big old grey muff that would have smothered Desdemona, a tippet of the same colour, as long as a boa-constrictor, a few old books, and on the top of all, evidently placed there to attract attention, a large sealed envelope containing papers.

Mr. Whistleshaft forgot even his fears in his natural desire for information, which had been his special characteristic through life. There was writing on the envelope, and he took up his lantern to inspect it, bending over the box, a white-cheeked, eager-eyed, and rapacious individual, with the deep darkness of the dead woman's room for a background.

"To be read after my death by Arthur and Helena Barclay, and in the presence of each other.

"(Signed) Jane Graves."

Mr. Whistleshaft read this aloud, and then in

a husky whisper added, "What can there be inside?"

He was an honest man, but he forgot himself a little in his desire to know more than his neighbours. He set the lantern down, and broke the black seal with which the envelope was secured; herein would be a something by which he might profit, and Arthur Barclay had acted badly by him.

There were papers within the envelope, and his long thin fingers had already secured them, when the climax came, to his horror and dismay, and with a shock that never wholly left him in his after-life. There was a rush of something or some one towards him from the window—curtains that he had all along distrusted, and upon which he had turned his back, followed by a cry, or groan, or scream—he knew not which—and then he was hurled with violence to the ground, the papers were torn from his grasp, and the light of the lantern extinguished suddenly and awfully.

It was broad daylight when William Whistle-shaft came to his senses. He had lain there in a deep swoon, and no one had taken the trouble to bring him to. The box was locked

and the key gone, and his lantern, with the oil spilt upon the carpet, was lying under a chair on which the black cat was sitting complacently washing her face. There was no sign of the papers, and there was a splitting sensation at the back of his head, as though he had fallen upon it, which he was sure that he had when he found that a thing like a walnut had sprouted up there in the night.

He gathered himself together, pocketed his lantern, went slowly and ruefully out of the house, and began his long walk to Chingford, which town he did not reach till six in the morning, when his neighbours and friends were astir. He had been for an early walk, he told his sister, who met him at the street door, but Polly Whistleshaft shook her head, and thought that her brother was going to the bad.

CHAPTER VIII.

NOVEMBER THE FIRST.

THE opening of Mrs. Graves's box on the first of November, in the presence of Helena and Arthur Barclay, with Valentine Merrick as a witness, by special desire, was a complete *fiasco*. Valentine Merrick had been brought from town, when town to him was bringing much business, to witness the disinterment of a medley of material from a box that had moulted half its calf-skin in Yorkshire, and was shedding the rest of its rustiness in Weddercombe. This solemn party of three had only met together to inspect Mrs. Graves's dresses, the big grey muff, and the anaconda tippet; and the two men stood and looked thoughtfully down upon them—Arthur Barclay twirling at his moustache, after his old habit, and thinking of the key that he had lost in the Temple; whilst Helena, on her

knees before the box, removed slowly and carefully every article that it contained. Downstairs in the drawing-room, with two visitors, Mrs. Merrick awaited them; she had declined any share in the new mystery, which appeared to be mysterious only from its lack of material.

"Nothing!" said Helena, when the last articles, consisting of a few old newspapers, had been removed. "Well, I am glad."

She drew a deep breath of relief, and Arthur said,

"Why glad?"

"I was afraid that we had not done with trouble—that there were new embarrassments and trials for you and me," she said.

"Probably, for we have not been lucky in our lives," was the slow answer.

"Not yet," said Helena.

"Still Mrs. Graves meant something, and was not a foolish woman," said Arthur Barclay. "What are those newspapers about?"

Helena opened them, gave a faint cry, and crushed them together in her hands.

"The old story," she whispered—"the story of the trial!"

"The history of a great mistake," added

Valentine, "to which we need not refer again."

"Please Heaven—no!" cried Helena. "But," turning to Valentine, "that poor misguided woman, who sinned so deeply for my sake, had a reason for our opening this box together."

"If our friend here had not been quite so impatient, and had refrained from jumping on the lid, and kicking at the lock in his excitement," said Valentine, "we might have approached the subject more critically."

"You think that the house has been entered, and the box opened during our absence?" asked Arthur.

"I have a suspicion that way."

"Ah! you gentlemen of the Bar are all suspicions; you live on them," was the answer.

A sharp reply was on Valentine's lips, but it was arrested by the pallor on Helena Barclay's face. Yes, he had been terribly suspicious in his day!

"The room appeared to be undisturbed, save that there was oil spilt upon the carpet," said Helena, thoughtfully. "Poor Jane Graves might have done that at the last moment, in her excitement, before going away."

“Did any of the servants allude to the oil?” asked Valentine. “But there, I pain you. This is my Old Bailey criticising spirit, and I daresay that I am wrong.”

“No one would have thought of coming to this room.”

“Except Whistleshaft,” said Arthur; “and he has not been near the property; besides, of what use would anything in Jane Graves’s box be to the auctioneer? I like Whistleshaft—he’s honest; I can trust him.”

“That’s more than I should care to do,” said Valentine.

“You would trust him sooner than me,” said Arthur, with a short laugh; “and, by Jove! you would be right enough!”

“We all wish to trust you, Arthur,” said Helena, earnestly. “The errors of our lives are ended, and this is the beginning of a better time for you—for me.”

“For you I hope it may be, Helena,” was the answer; “but I am past redemption.”

“Don’t say so—don’t think so.”

“I am not quite so bad as people consider—not wholly so great a scamp as Downton Vale folk might lead you to expect,” said Arthur

Barclay ; “but I am bad enough—a fierce, ungovernable ne’er-do-weel, whom there is no saving.”

“You will meet with friends at Weddercombe,” said Helena, “and settle down to the life of an English country gentleman. There are friends downstairs already to whom I wish to introduce you before I go away.”

“I don’t want any friends. I hate society!” he muttered.

“I leave Weddercombe to your care, Arthur.”

“And the arrangements for its purchase?”

“You will take it from my hands as freely as I offer it to you,” urged Helena. “There is no false pride or unjust suspicion between us. Arthur Barclay, I for one trust you; will you trust me in your turn?”

“Yes, Helena,” he said mournfully, as he took her small white hands in his big palms, “but in what way can you help me? By your money?”

“Why should I not help you with my money?” said Helena, boldly. “It was an unjust will that bequeathed all to me, and left you poor.”

“I am not poor.”

“You are not rich; it is impossible that——”

“Nothing is impossible to a persevering or a

desperate man. I made money in a desperate fashion this year."

"But you will take Weddercombe from me—in trust from me, as sign of our new confidence?"

He shook his head.

"Not as a present, Helena," he answered; "you know how I always hated favours, and how my uncle wished that I should never be the better for one penny of his cash. He blasted my life and left me a beggar, and I respect the wish that lavished all his wealth on you. I will purchase Weddercombe as a fitting place to hide in, but, as I am a living man, I will never take it as a gift!"

His face crimsoned with the energy of his reply, his eyes flashed with their old strange fire, and the veins in his forehead swelled into dark blue cords with his excitement.

"Yours is an indomitable will," said Helena with a sigh; "but have you not forgiven Michael Barclay, or seen that, had he lived, his heart would have softened towards you?"

"And hardened against his young wife very likely," added Arthur. "Yes, I have forgiven him! I went to his vault in Downton church,

and said so only a few weeks since, Helena."

"I am glad of that."

A light tap on the panels of the door directed attention to an applicant without, and then a musical voice said,

"Will the conspirators be very long, as Percy and I are tired of waiting?"

"Come in, Floy," said Helena, opening the door; "here is my kinsman, Arthur Barclay, to whom your brother Percy wishes to be introduced."

Arthur Barclay glared at Helena indignantly for forcing upon him an introduction which he had made up his mind to avoid, and then blushed like a girl, and looked half askance in an odd and confused manner at the fair apparition stealing in timidly, and seeming to bring with her some of the sunshine that was beyond the house that day.

Floy Andison advanced, looked hard at Arthur Barclay, clapped her hands suddenly in her excitement and surprise, and went more quickly towards him.

"Why, you're the wild Englishman!" she cried, half laughing and half crying. "Don't you know me?"

He looked steadily at her in return.

“Yes, perfectly,” he said, in a hoarse whisper that instantly drew all eyes towards him.

CHAPTER IX.

A VISION FROM THE PAST.

IT was an unexpected meeting in Mrs. Graves's room, at the foot of the big box from which the mystery had escaped, leaving no trace of a solution. Valentine Merrick and Helena were surprised ; for that Arthur Barclay should know Florence Andison was at first sight incomprehensible.

“Will you shake hands with me now?” Florence said archly ; and Arthur Barclay, even then it seemed reluctantly, took Florence's hand in his and bowed over it ; the red colour lingered in his face, as though an extra dose of confusion had permanently burnt it in.

“I see that there is no necessity for an introduction,” said Helena, smiling.

“You are Mr. Barclay,” Florence asked of Arthur—“the gentleman who so studiously avoid-

ed my brother and me in Yorkshire a few weeks since? Was it for the reason that you——”

“That I knew you? No,” he answered; “I was only anxious to avoid Mrs. Barclay’s friends.”

“Thank you,” said Florence, drily; “if that is not particularly polite, it’s exceedingly frank. And you remember me?”

“Perfectly,” he said again.

“This is an old friend of mine—a true friend,” said Florence, in explanation to the rest of the company; “he saved my life at Baden a few months ago, and would not let me thank him for it afterwards.”

“I do not remember you telling us of this,” said Valentine.

“No, I’m sure that I did not,” answered Florence, laughing. “I never told anybody, lest mamma should stop my horse-riding, or papa send an army of grooms to career behind me, or there should be a general fuss and bother in all directions at once. Nevertheless, if it had not been for that gentleman, I should not have had the pleasure of your company this morning.”

“How was it?” asked Helena, full of interest in the narrative.

Florence waited for Mr. Barclay to explain, but he made no attempt to do so.

"The fact is," Florence said at last, "my horse bolted. It was a rough part of the country, and the horse went straight for a precipice, as if to make an end of the two of us. Mr. Barclay saw us coming, and made a plunge at the bridal, damaged his arm, and stopped the horse. He scolded me for getting on such a brute, used some strong language—which he thought that I did not hear, but I did—about his arm, declined to receive my thanks or shake hands with me, in grateful acknowledgment for my deliverance, said it was all nothing, and that I had been uncommonly foolish, and then walked away in a huff."

Arthur Barclay listened to the explanation with a wondering interest. Florence's rapid method of delivering her words, and the odd words which she used to give point to her narrative, were new to him; and the grim downward curves of his mouth twitched strangely, as if the strong man were trying hard to keep his smiles down.

"It was a passing service, that anyone would have done in my place," he answered, in quick

jerks of explanation. "I was there by accident. I was used to horses. I did not require any thanks from you—I was not deserving of them."

"Not for breaking your arm to save me!" cried Florence.

"Not if I had broken my neck," he added, with his old abruptness.

Florence looked from Helena to him, and then said,

"Helena tells me that you will settle at Weddercombe, Mr. Barclay. My father will be glad of you for a neighbour, and will do himself the pleasure of calling upon you presently."

"Your father will do me too much honour," he muttered, "and will find me but poor company. What I was in Baden, what you knew I was, with all the rest of them, I am still."

"Oh! I hope not!" cried Florence, impulsively.

"I have not come to Weddercombe to settle down; it is beyond my power of self-control, Miss Andison, to settle to anything. Pray warn Sir Charles of that, and beg him not to call upon me," he said, with some degree of agitation.

"Baden belongs to the old days," said Florence, slowly.

"When people pointed at the wild Englishman in the streets and warned their friends that he was dangerous," muttered Arthur Barclay.

"When you saved my life," Florence answered, readily.

"I don't know that," he answered, as he turned away.

They descended to the drawing-room, where Arthur Barclay had to undergo the ordeal of another introduction, and went through the ceremony almost with politeness this time, as if practice were rendering the task more easy. Percy Andison expressed his satisfaction at making Mr. Barclay's acquaintance. Arthur bore the same name as the woman he loved, and he knew that Helena wished that Arthur Barclay should make friends in his new home. Percy spoke with ease and earnestness, and the man who had no faith in himself was already surprised at the denizens of his new world.

Arthur was not accustomed to any exhibition of friendship, and every man's hand and heart

had been so long against him, that to find himself surrounded by these good folk confused him greatly. He had been at one time inclined to break away from them, but it struck even him that it would be a poor return for their consideration, and he sat down at last in his own drawing-room—for he was not going to leave it again, and had taken possession at once, at Helena's request, although weeks would intervene before the legal transfer was complete—and, if reserved and grim, was at least tolerant of his visitors' company, and on his best behaviour. Once or twice he glanced at Florence Andison, as if her presence there were the greatest riddle or the greatest trouble to him, and that was only when he was perfectly assured that no one was observing him.

Here in this drawing-room was all the bustle of departure and leave-taking—the end of one life, the beginning of another. Helena and Mrs. Merrick were going back, with Valentine as escort, to London; it had all been arranged long since; the boxes were at the station, and the carriage was already waiting to take them away. Valentine had seen Sir Charles and

Lady Andison, bidden them adieu, made many promises to come down to the Hall at every opportunity, and here were brother and sister to see the last of him.

Valentine and Florence—the happy couple whose course of true love had run so smoothly—strolled to the lawn in the front of the house to exchange their parting words with greater freedom; and it was there that the fair girl linked her hands upon her lover's arm after the old fashion, and looked inquiringly and tenderly into his face.

“You are going away, Val, now—for how long a time?”

“Oh, not for long,” he answered. “And you? We shall see you in London shortly—Sir Charles talks of bringing you. It's an old compact.”

“Dear papa talks of a great many things that never come to pass, and he will not leave Hernley for London at this time of the year,” said Florence, shaking her head; “but you will write.”

“Of course I shall write,” cried Val, laughing; “why do you ask, and why is my little Floy so sad?”

"I'm not particularly sad, Val," said Florence ;
"but, if you must know——"

"Well, if I must know," he echoed.

"I hardly like Helena going to your home."

"To my mother's home, not mine."

"It will be yours—it is yours very often."

"I shall keep to my chambers, patronizing the mother and the widow once a month, perhaps, on a Sunday afternoon—*voilà tout !*" he cried. "And now, Florence," he added, more gravely, "is this jealousy? Jealousy of nothing—of an illusion—a fancy !"

"I told you long ago that I was awfully jealous, Val," she said, looking down ; "and, though I have nothing to be jealous about, and never shall have, and though you may not see Helena very frequently, and she may be for ever very much afraid of you, still she is going to your mother's house, and your mother will love her very much."

"Why should she not?"

"She will love her better than me."

"Has Helena Barclay met with so much affection in her life that you should envy her even that?" asked Valentine.

"No ; still, if she had made other friends, I—

I should have liked it better. Val, I am afraid of Helena Barclay."

"Is it your turn to distrust her?"

"I have every confidence in her; of late days she has been like a sister to me. But it is her gentleness, and grace, and amiability of which I am afraid—and oh! she is far more clever and pretty than the little woman you are leaving behind."

"If I leave my heart along with the little woman, what does it matter?" said Val, gallantly.

"And you do, don't you?"

What gentleman properly and duly affianced could have said less than "Yes" to his *fiancée*? Valentine said "Yes," and believed that he meant it. He was engaged to Florence Anderson, and he was a man of honour and a gentleman. He had seen no one—he was certain that he had met no one—whom he liked so much as little Floy; and he said "Yes" with a fair degree of warmth and spontaneity, and little Floy was pleased enough to hear him.

"You must not mind my silly fancies, Val," she murmured—"I do not see much of you; you are for ever steeped in business, and hidden away

in town, and women like me have much time for thinking. I don't distrust Helena Barclay. I don't believe that she will ever like you in the least ; but," after a pause, "I should love her more than I do if I loved Val Merrick less."

"Have you said anything of this to Helena?"

"Oh, good gracious, not a word !" cried Florence. "Do you think I would be so foolish as that?"

"Well, hardly. But you are rather strange, Floy, and your imagination has run away with you."

"I am humbly penitent. Forgive me," she said archly, and Valentine kissed his lady-love behind a convenient angle of the house, where nobody could possibly see them, and all was well, and both were happy in this fair Spring-time of their courtship.

That was their private and confidential farewell ; the more matter-of-fact adieu was after Valentine had seen his mother and Helena into the carriage, and when Percy and Florence were under the portico with Arthur Barclay.

"Good-bye," said Valentine. "I shall write next week. I shall run down to Hernley soon."

"Do," said Floy ; and Val was surprised at

seeing the tears swimming in her eyes, as though he were going to Australia or South Africa, or as if a few hours' ride would not always bring him to her side.

The carriage was whirled away, Helena waved her hand to them, and Percy Andison stood bareheaded and dreaming, looking after her of whom he had made an idol. This was the end of it all for him—there were no doubts on his side—let him love her ever so well.

"Courage, Percy, old boy," his sister whispered in his ear, "and let us say good afternoon to Mr. Barclay."

"I had forgotten him," he answered.

He shook hands with Arthur Barclay.

"You will let me run over here at times and join you in your shooting," said Percy to him; "and you will find sport at Hernley in my father's covers, and a welcome at the Hall."

Arthur Barclay looked hard at the speaker.

"Mrs. Barclay has arranged all this very well for me, and I thank her for the interest that comes too late in life to do me any good," he said slowly, and half sadly; "still I thank you, Mr. Andison."

"We ask you to come," said Florence, "not

alone at the expressed wish of Mrs. Barclay, but in our desire to become your neighbours and friends, if you will let us."

He bowed his head very gravely, and did not reply for several seconds.

"I have already said that I am totally unfit for society, Miss Andison," he answered at length, "and hence it is unlikely that I shall ever come to Hernley. But if you," turning suddenly to Percy, "think it, at any time, worth your while to visit Weddercombe, and bear with me and my rough manners, I may, in my best moods, which are unfrequent, be almost glad to see you."

It was an odd way of putting it, even an ungracious answer, but still it was a concession for Arthur Barclay, who only a little while ago had disavowed his claims to honest men's respect. The friends had come about him very strangely, and one face had stolen on his life again, as an angel's might have gleamed from heaven.

He had seen it once in his misspent career, and its look of gratitude, its glow of beauty and innocence, had lingered in his memory, and been for ever a reminiscence of light falling

athwart the darkness through which he groped his way. Strange to see that bright young face again, to hear the music of her voice once more, and to feel how close she was to his new home ! He stood on the threshold, with his strong hands clasped behind him, and his own sorrowful yearning eyes watching brother and sister pass away from Weddercombe.

Friendship and faith had been proffered him for the first time in his life, and the man's heart had been touched—if only galvanically and temporarily.

“Ah, if it had been years ago, when I was not so bad as this !” he murmured. “If it were not too late !”

CHAPTER X.

RICHMOND.

THE new life of Helena Barclay began from that day's drive from Weddercombe, and gathered strength and brightness with every hour that set her further from it. This seemed her third and best existence, to which no trouble could come; and in her past two lives at Downton Vale and Weddercombe she had borne with more calamity than falls to the lot of most folk. In her present estate she took some little content to herself, and became by degrees a different woman.

No one had seen Helena in her early days; but hers must have been a trusting nature, that had witnessed some happiness in her childhood, and taken its colours from it until Michael Barclay crossed her life. She even believed in Michael Barclay, and married him to make one

less in a thrifty home ; and she had suffered sorely for it. Hers was a nature that a little love rendered joyful, and, with Mrs. Merrick for companion, Helena took a new lease of hope, and was almost happy, after a while, in the simple pleasures of the gentlewoman's home. She had emerged from the past—she tried hard to live down reminiscences, and she succeeded tolerably well, though there were “dark hours,” when faces came between her and her peace and rendered her terribly thoughtful. It was natural that she should not forget, for hers had been an awful experience ; but it was also natural that a re-action should come to her youth, with so much faith and love beside her.

Only Mrs. Merrick knew what a kind companion, earnest friend, and faithful daughter she had discovered in Helena Barclay. She wondered how she had lived so long in a state of semi-isolation at Richmond, after she had grown accustomed to the bright young presence at her side, and knew its wealth of affection and depth of earnestness. Only Mrs. Merrick understood what a feeling woman she had secured for a companion, and what a sunshiny nature Helena's could be at times ; for, when Valentine

came down to his mother's house, Helena was staid enough for a woman twice her age, and the colour only deepened on her cheeks as she became more used to his society, and it was time for him to go away.

His first appearance, Val was quick enough to observe—having passed a great deal of his time in the observation of his species—was always a shock to her; she saw in him, he fancied, only the cruel advocate who had pleaded against her life at York—an ugly reminiscence which there was no living down. He did not see her frequently enough to rob her of that impression; he did not even visit his mother's house so often as it was in his power to do, remembering Floy Andison's foolish doubts and odd anxieties and jealousies. He had even turned away once when he had got as far as the Waterloo station, so that he should not appear to visit Richmond too frequently—he was sure it pleased Floy Andison to tell her in his letters that he had not been there lately.

And why should he go? What was the use? Where was the motive for running after his mother? He would have been glad to assure Helena Barclay by degrees that she had no

truer friend than himself—to have told even the story of his misery when he awoke first to the consciousness that he had unwittingly done her much injustice; but he thought that she understood him, and he knew that she had forgiven him.

True, she was afraid of him—she would be for ever afraid of him, Florence had said last November; and he would have been glad of Helena's respect and friendship, and even have endeavoured to secure it, had not the Baronet's daughter been in the way of his purpose, a check upon the impulse that would lead him at times from his briefs. Floy Andison's jealousy was absurd in the extreme; but she was an affectionate girl, whom it was his duty to humour, even in her whims, and who thought there was not such another fellow in the world as he was.

He wished at times that he had been more in love with Floy—more desperately and completely head over ears in love, he meant—so that dashing down to Hernley from Friday night to Monday morning should have been like taking the express to Paradise, rather than a tedious journey, with only a pretty girl at the end of it. He did this journey twice between November

and March, and thought that he had taken a great deal of trouble to show his devotion ; and Florence was very grateful for his presence, and for the news which he brought her that all was well at Richmond when he had seen Helena and his mother last.

All was well in the country. Arthur Barclay had taken a turn for the better, and sobered down very much, Val was told. Percy Andison had become almost Arthur's friend, and Mr. Whistleshaft had not been lately a visitor at Weddercombe.

It was with this news that he went down to Richmond a fortnight afterwards, on his mother's birthday, to wish her many happy returns of the day, and to take her a little present, which she would wrap in cotton-wool and hide away among her treasures, where it would be found some day, labelled—"A gift from my dear son Valentine on my sixtieth birthday !" He went down early, by way of change, having a faint idea of leaving early and getting back to town in time for the fragment of a "call-party" to which he had been invited ; hence he took them by surprise, and was surprised himself.

His mother was preparing for a little party of

her own, of which not the ghost of a warning had been given him—an evening party of a quiet, old-fashioned character, consisting of music, and whist, and conversation, with an indigestible supper at midnight. Mrs. Merrick knew that her son had no particular love for this kind of thing, but would settle down to it when once in its midst, and be as cheerful as the rest of the folk, out of respect for his mother's guests.

Receiving timely warning of it, he might have stopped away, she told him that afternoon, and he took her by the shoulders and shook her in playful reproof, after he had offered her his congratulations.

“Stop away on your birthday, mother!” he exclaimed. “How dare you think that I would act the part of such a thankless child as that?”

“I know that you would have preferred a quiet evening.”

“Well, possibly.”

“But I had half asked Mr. and Mrs. Chillingford; and I thought a few more or less would not matter; and Helena insisted upon the friends being summoned, lest they should think that I was keeping them away for her sake.”

“She does not care for society.”

"She hasn't got used to it; she is afraid of meeting people who know part of her history, and would be glad to hear the full details from her own lips. But my friends are hers."

"That's well. And you and she are very happy together?"

"Very happy, Val," was the reply. "When she goes away she will leave a great blank in my home, and in that heart upon which her kindness has won."

"When she goes away!" cried Valentine. "What do you mean? Does she think of leaving you? Is there to be another change, then?"

"Oh! no; she says that she will live with me for ever."

"Then what on earth makes you talk of her leaving?" said Valentine, almost angrily.

"She is very young—she will grow tired of my old ways and my old face some day."

"I don't see why she should."

"She will marry again. I think I know one or two young men about here who invent the most ridiculous excuses for coming to my house."

"Does she favour any of them?"

"No; she hides from them if she can—she snubs them if she can't."

"Perhaps she is waiting for old Percy, after all."

"No."

"He deserves her more than anyone."

"Yes," was the reply; "but she will never marry Percy Andison."

"Or anyone else," said Valentine; "and a wise woman too, who has had a terrible lot of marriage in a very small space of time, and wants no second husband. But where is she?"

"Mr. Hewitt has taken her and his sister for a row on the Thames."

"Who the devil's Hewitt?" exclaimed Valentine, petulantly.

"My dear!"

"People start up who are unknown to me; the circle of your acquaintance widens; fresh faces drop in, and fresh names crop up, and I become with every visit a greater stranger!" he cried.

"Ah! Valentine, if you would come more often, then," said Mrs. Merrick, softly—"if you would not stop away so long, and always plead business as an excuse for forgetting your mother!"

She passed her hand hastily before her eyes,

and turned away. He followed her, and put his arm round her.

"Come, mother dear, you must not fire away your reproaches in this fashion," he said, very kindly. "I am always busy, and I would come more often if I could—if the Fates would allow me."

"It is not want of inclination that keeps you away?"

"On my honour, no."

"I am glad of that, Val," said Mrs. Merrick; "sometimes I feel sure that you are learning to forget me."

"Is that likely?"

"Or that you are reconciling your conscience to keeping away by thinking that I am less lonely with Helena for a companion. As if any one could make amends for my boy!"

"Yes, yes; I see that you have been brooding upon this," he said. "I am sorry. You should know me better than to think I don't care to run down. I am always too glad to see the old home."

"My dear boy, I believe you; but you came more frequently once, didn't you?"

"Yes; but now it rains business. I have

gained two more big victories, and even you will scarcely believe what a wonderful man you have got for a son."

He said it as a pleasant jest, but the fond mother took it all in sober earnest; and it was true enough that the profession talked a great deal of Valentine Merrick.

"I believe every word of it," she said; "sometimes I am very glad, sometimes I am very sorry, for you used to stay a week at a time here before Helena Barclay came."

"Ay—before Helena was here—yes—certainly," he said, absently; "and the room is always ready for me, I suppose?"

"Of course it is."

"I will come again—when I can."

Thus the little colloquy terminated, and Mrs. Merrick went away to look after the cook, whilst Valentine strolled into the small garden at the back of the house, leaned over the parapet at the end, stared at the river, and thought of all that his mother had said, and of the artful way in which he had fenced with her questioning.

He could not tell her of Floy Andison's wishes—he should not like to put those idle fancies into his mother's head. They were very

absurd—they were unjust and tyrannical and selfish, for the matter of that, when one came to analyse them, but let them be! It pleased Floy to consider that Helena Barclay was a woman of whom the less he saw the better for his constancy. It was not complimentary to his honour, and it was far too complimentary to Helena's beauty. As if he had not seen hundreds of more beautiful women, and been unimpressed by them—no, not more beautiful, and never one with such a soul in her dark eyes!

And the woman he had doubted once when his self-conceit had made him over-wise—— Oh! he could not moon there any longer—let him take advantage of the bright day, and stroll away an hour or two along the banks of the river, or get his boat out—that boat which had been his hobby once, and which he had kept at Richmond, and done great journeys in, to the enlargement of his chest and the development of his muscles. How strange that he had not thought of it before! It was a fine bright day—quite a Summer day—and he should enjoy a pull on the river immensely.

He was rowing towards Twickenham ten minutes after this by the Richmond clocks.

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE RIVER.

BEFORE starting for his row on the Thames, Valentine Merrick had exchanged a few words with one of those amphibious beings who haunt the water-side, and the man's words gave him subject-matter for thought as he pulled through the water afterwards.

The man had recognised Merrick, and, whilst assisting to get the boat off, had hoped "his honour" was well and prospering.

"You'll find the lady that way, Mister Merrick," he had said, pointing towards Twickenham.

"What lady are you alluding to?" asked Valentine, sharply.

"Oh! the good lady, to be shure," said the man, with a strong Irish accent, "who's been a blessing to the likes of us, as well as to your

honour's mother. She comes amongst us as if she weren't afeard, and helps us, when we are down, with all her heart—and it's a big 'un. Hiven save the lady!—what a woife she'll make the lad she takes a fancy to!"

"Push off!" said Valentine; and away he went into midstream, selecting the route which the Jack-in-the-water had been obliging enough to indicate, though he was not going in search of Helena Barclay—though he wished to be alone, to have a long row on the river before dinner-time—though he marvelled at the Irishman's impudence in taking it for granted that he was anxious to overtake a lady whom he had studiously avoided for months.

A mile or two up the Thames, when he was still thinking of his mother and Helena, and what the man had said about them both, when he was even wondering what had become of Helena and her friends—for it was singular that there had been no sign of her on the river!—he caught sight of the fishing party in a boat moored under the shadow of some trees, the gentleman angling, the ladies reading in the stern.

No one saw him, no one was dreaming of

him, and he could row past them unobserved, if he wished it. He thought that he would pass them, until the merry ripple of women's laughter startled him, and even aggravated him—for what reason he could not satisfactorily explain; and he turned the boat's head, and rowed suddenly towards the little party.

Mr. Hewitt, a pasty-faced young man in spectacles, said a few words to the ladies as he approached, and then Helena looked up and saw him, and the old startled look, the sudden vanishing of the colour from her face, came as usual, and vexed him still more. He was always a source of fear to her when they first met—he came upon her with the shock of an unpleasant surprise, the man for whom she had a dislike there was no possibility of conquering. He saw her too seldom to become her friend, to bring any look of pleasure to her face at meeting him. She had long ago forgiven him, but he was part and parcel of a stern reminiscence that nothing could erase. Every time he met her, he added to the injuries which he had heaped upon her; she endeavoured to be amiable in his company, but it was none the less apparent that she was afraid of him, that she tolerated him for his mo-

ther's sake, and out of gratitude for the friend whom he had found for her.

"Mr. Merrick!" he heard her say, and then the boats were close to each other, and he was enabled to shake hands with her.

"We expected you to-day; but this is an early visit, for which your mother was scarcely prepared, I think," she said.

"I scared her almost as much as I have done you, Mrs. Barclay," he said, lightly and jestingly, but she answered a little sadly,

"You did not scare me—I was only surprised."

Helena introduced him to Miss Hewitt, a dashing young lady, all hat and feathers and flounces, who bowed and showed a great many teeth, and was generally complaisant; and then Mr. Hewitt was made acquainted with Mr. Merrick, and both gentlemen exchanged the usual salaams of civilised life; and Mr. Hewitt, somewhat confused, dropped his rod into the water, and saw it sink from his possession for ever.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed, stretching over the edge of the boat, "that's very strange. That's the second rod I have lost this week.

How annoying, to be sure! And what a very fine day for March, Mr. Merrick!"

"Very fine. Any sport?"

"Pretty fair. If you would like half-an-hour with the rod, I have one to the good yet. I brought fishing-tackle for the ladies, but they prefer their books, you see."

"I thank you, but I must get back."

"Are you going home now?" asked Helena.

"Yes. Can I assist you in any manner?"

"If you will. I did not like to suggest an interruption to Mr. Hewitt's fishing, but, if I should not be in the way, I should be glad to return with you."

"My dear Mrs. Barclay," exclaimed Mr. Hewitt, very earnestly, but in a flustering kind of way that Valentine secretly objected to, "why didn't you say—why didn't you tell me that you were tired of this before?"

"I am not tired, and I was interested in my book," she said; "but Mr. Merrick's presence reminds me of something that I wish to tell him."

"Pray don't let me—not for a moment! If Mr. Merrick will be kind enough to—mind how you step, Mrs. Barclay. We shall see you this

evening. "Good day," were words that escaped Mr. Hewitt; and then Helena Barclay stepped into Valentine's boat, and took the seat facing him, and Valentine saw that the colour had stolen back to her cheeks.

He was a little surprised, and somewhat pleased, at Helena's desire to return with him instead of remaining with those friends with whom she had set forth; and when "good days" had been exchanged, and the boats were some lengths apart, he said,

"I did not expect to have the pleasure of rowing you to my mother's house."

"No, I suppose not," she added, thoughtfully.

"You were anxious to escape from that lady and gentleman?"

"What makes you think so?"

"You would have hardly availed yourself of this means of flight had that not been the case."

"Did it seem to you a very unceremonious flitting?" she inquired.

"It appeared so to them, I fancied."

"I am sorry if they thought so," said Helena. "I did not wish to hurt their feelings; but they are people whom I don't like very much."

“Why did you accompany them?”

“They called for me, and your mother pressed me to join them; and there was not any valid excuse for refusing.”

“May I ask——”

“Why I don’t like them?” said Helena, frankly. “Yes, you may. They are too full of compliment; they are so excessively polite that they embarrass me.”

“Ah, gushers!”

“And Mr. Hewitt——”

“And Mr. Hewitt?” repeated Valentine, as she paused suddenly.

“Oh, I don’t like him at all,” she added, almost petulantly.

“I understand,” Valentine said, drily; and then he rowed on in silence, and looked at Helena facing him, and thought to himself how beautiful she was, how unlike any woman whom he had ever seen, how strange his past distrust and great dislike of her, how awfully strange that first meeting in the Sessions House at York. It was no matter for wonderment that she should dread the sight of him, and lose every atom of colour at his first approach.

“You had something to tell me, you informed

Mr. Hewitt," remarked Valentine—"is that quite correct?"

"It was no excuse," said Helena—"I will explain directly."

She was gaining time to gather courage to tell him something; he could see the colour in her cheeks dying out again and the waxen whiteness replacing it; and it was not till the colour stole back from her heart that she addressed him in a low, soft tone, with her gaze directed to the water.

"I hope that you will not think me very bold in intruding upon a subject relating to yourself and your mother, but I should like to speak out, if you will let me."

"Pray speak," said Valentine.

"I had made up my mind to summon courage to tell you all at the first opportunity, and at any risk," Helena commenced, "but I was not prepared to do so as soon as this. Your mother, and the only true friend that I have, is unhappy."

"Unhappy!" exclaimed Valentine.

"I had hoped to render her very happy, and I believe, and I am grateful for believing, that I have been a companion and friend whom she

would miss, and whom she has learned to love, but——”

“Well?” he asked, anxiously.

“But I do not take the place of the son, and—you keep away from her,” said Helena, with greater confidence.

“She has told me as much already,” responded our hero.

“Has she told you how she frets about your absence—how she prays that you may come more frequently—how she believes in every reason for it but that which I know to be the truth and dare not tell her?”

“What do you know to be the truth?” Valentine asked quickly.

“Ah, Mr. Merrick, I am an observant woman, not a child; and there is much time for me to think a truth out as evident as this one.”

“Go on, please.”

“You keep away from Richmond because I am here as your mother’s guest—because in coming you cannot escape me.”

“Mrs. Barclay !”

“I know, Mr. Merrick, that I should have asked your permission to share your mother’s home, to try with all my soul to become as a

daughter to her," said Helena with a trembling voice, "but oh, sir, I was alone in the world! Jane Graves was dead, and there was no one else to whom I could turn in my desolation. Pardon me, but I did not think of you till afterwards."

"Madam, I should have had no objection to urge. For my mother's sake—for your own—I was very glad," said Valentine.

She shook her head.

"It is generous of you to say so, but for all that, Mr. Merrick, it keeps you away from Richmond. You cannot say that it is the pressure of business alone which holds you back from home."

She looked eagerly towards him in her anxiety to read the truth, and to compel him to its utterance, and he flinched at the steady unwavering dark eyes.

"Not always pressure of business, probably, but——"

"Spare me your excuses; you have no right to make them to me," said Helena very rapidly—"I do not consider for an instant that I am entitled to them. You and I, Mr. Merrick, have no cause to evade the truth."

“What truth?” asked Valentine.

“That it is not pleasant for us to meet each other, even now, with all your suspicions dead. When I see you at first, my heart stops suddenly.”

“I am aware of it,” said Valentine, slowly.

“With you comes always the past horror of that day when you demanded from justice my poor life,” she said. “It is the first thought—I cannot escape it. I feel as if you had come again to denounce me. I have tried to break away from this feeling—to think that with the past is buried my old fear of you—but, forgive me, I cannot.”

“Hence you for one are not sorry that I keep away,” said Valentine.

“Ah, there you are mistaken! I am very sorry,” said Helena, fearlessly; “if you would come more often, I should be glad. Not for my own sake,” she added quickly; “although I should live down my fear of you, and you would not always see in me the woman tried for murder. But you would make that heart more light in which the son’s name stands first.”

“It is because I see in you a woman tried for murder that I keep away, then?” Valentine inquired.

"Yes," was the response, as the gloved hands were wrung together for an instant with their owner's sudden sense of pain.

"Because you shock my nice sense of propriety, which has no consideration for your innocence and suffering, and sees in you only a girl who stood up in a felon's dock and said, 'Not guilty?'" added the barrister. "Thank you, Mrs. Barclay, for estimating my character so correctly, and giving me credit for such manly feelings."

"You speak bitterly," said Helena, very sadly, "but——"

"But it is not the truth," said Valentine, with emphasis, as he interrupted her, and rested on his sculls to give more force to his denial; "it is the wildest of delusions. I see in you one who has been deeply injured, and whose young life has been a martyrdom, which I have helped to create."

"Oh, sir, you were sorry for me at last!"

"Then why attribute to me so mean a motive for my absence?"

"The past is not forgotten, Mr. Merrick."

"I have forgotten it."

"No, no, that is impossible! But, sir——"

“For Heaven’s sake, don’t ‘sir’ me again!” exclaimed Valentine, petulantly.

“But if you keep away on my account,” she continued “because you have seen with what terrible force that past will rise before me, and would in your consideration spare me from it—if I could believe that *that* was the reason—I should be glad to be excused your charity. It is only when you come as a surprise,” she added, “that I fear you. I should soon get used to you. You are my friend, and wish no ill to me. I could keep away till you were gone even. Ah, I would go away altogether, if I felt that you would take your old place in your mother’s home, and think more often of the claim she has upon your attention.”

“It is a reproof not ill-deserved,” said Valentine, as he rowed on again, “for I have been ungrateful to her—I have neglected her—and without a fair excuse. Yes, I must remember the mother a little. I will turn over a new leaf from this day, if I can, and as you think so badly of me.”

“I do not think badly of you,” answered Helena.

“But you are afraid of me.”

"No—hardly afraid," said Helena, hesitatingly again, "for I rely on you—I look up to you. In any great trouble, I would come to you to help me."

"Oh, the great troubles are over now," said Valentine, confidently.

"I don't know," said Helena, thoughtfully; "life is young with me, and there are mysteries still. What did Jane Graves mean at the last?"

"It is impossible to guess."

"I have found a clue to her meaning," said Helena, "and have been waiting for you to help me towards it more completely. I did not feel to have the courage to attempt the matter alone."

"You trust me, then?" he said.

"Yes."

"And will you promise not to fear me again if I come more often?"

"I will try with all my heart," said Helena.

He rested his right oar so that he could extend his hand towards her in his impulse, and frankly and confidently she placed hers within it. They were close upon home then, and a watcher from the shore, whom they had not observed, saw the compact ratified by the shaking of their hands,

and wondered at the rapt interest and earnestness on both their faces.

It was Percy Andison, who was waiting for them on the river bank.

CHAPTER XII.

A BIRTHDAY PRESENT

AS VALENTINE MERRICK rowed Helena to shore, the vision of Percy Andison upon the bank startled both of them.

“What, Percy!—who would have dreamed of your turning up like this?” cried Valentine.

“I went to your chambers; they told me there that you had run down to Richmond,” said Percy; and then he leaned forward to shake hands with Helena, and assist her from the boat; and Valentine stepped back in consideration for his friend’s feelings, and allowed him the honour and privilege of assisting the widow.

Percy Andison was grateful. His face glowed with pleasure and embarrassment. He forgot all about Valentine, until the barrister inquired after Florence’s health in his turn, and then the three together walked towards Mrs. Merrick’s house.

"I had business in town," Percy explained *en route*, "and thought that you might be able to spare me an hour or two, Val."

"I am afraid that I have brought you very much out of your way," said Valentine, with easy unconsciousness.

"Not at all," said Percy, blushing very much; "I am delighted—I am very glad to come to Richmond in search of you. It—it affords me an opportunity of seeing more friends than one. Your mother told me that I should find you on the river—but not with Mrs. Barclay."

"I have just rescued Mrs. Barclay from a prosy fishing party."

"And the lady was thanking you for her deliverance when——"

Percy paused as Valentine swung himself quickly round and faced him.

"When you first caught sight of us—exactly, Percy," said Valentine, finishing the sentence for him.

"That is scarcely a correct statement," said Helena.

"It will do," answered Valentine.

He did not care to explain for himself, and he would not allow Helena the opportunity. It

was a story that did not concern Percy Andison; and, if that young fellow had felt in any way jealous at the tableau which he had witnessed, why, serve him right, for he had no reason, at any time, and under any circumstances, to be jealous of Val Merrick, of all men in the world.

When they had reached the house, Helena left the two young men to themselves. She had spoken of a clue to the mystery of Jane Graves's last wish, and of requiring Val's advice upon it, but the subject was not resumed, and Helena went in search of Mrs. Merrick, to offer assistance in her multifarious duties before it was time to dress for the *soirée*.

"Have you dined, Percy?" asked Val.

"Thank you; I dined early, in town."

"Lucky for swell diners like you," cried Val; "for my mother is of the five-o'clock heavy-tea order, and all this is not in your line."

"I am not a swell diner," said Percy, almost petulantly; "and why should not this be in my line?"

"They are quiet folk here."

"I admire a quiet life."

"And," Valentine added, with a shudder that he could not repress, "my mother has a party

on this evening that will considerably astonish you—an old-fashioned party of old-fashioned fogies and frumps, without motive or programme, where we shall sit round the room and stare at each other, and ask each other to sing until it is time to go home.”

“Why did you come if you object so much to a party of this kind?” was Percy’s natural inquiry. —

“It is my mother’s birthday. I never miss it.”

“I beg pardon,” said Percy, quickly; “of course not. And now, Val, for mercy’s sake don’t offer me any more half apologies. I am glad to visit Richmond; it is coming to Paradise, knowing that she is here.”

“Who—my mother?” said Valentine, wilfully misunderstanding him.

“Oh, you know whom I mean,” answered Percy, with a woeful sigh.

“Have you not got over that little weakness?” asked Valentine, meaningly.

“Have I got over the habit of breathing, do you think?” was the rejoinder.

“Not at present, I should say, though you need not breathe in double-quick time.”

“Val,” cried Percy, impetuously, “my heart

always beats at a double-quick pace when I think of Helena Barclay. I shall go mad about her some day—her beauty distracts me, and the hopeless nature of my passion sinks me to a terrible depth of despair. I know that in her heart she hates the sight of me, and I keep away all that I can—but only to see her is a glimpse of heaven to me.”

“I am sorry,” said Val, thoughtfully.

“Twelve months ago I believed that I should never care for living woman, and that my best friends would be my books,” said Percy. “I could not understand romance, and I sneered at romantic people; but what a cruel romance this is to me, Heaven knows—nobody else, save it and my own wretched self!”

He sprang from the chair whereon he was sitting, with Valentine facing him, and walked up and down the room impatiently.

“It would be a lucky thing for you to get something to work at,” said Valentine—“some new, red-hot pursuit, which should drive her from your mind. This is overdoing it.”

“Ah, you don’t understand what real love is.”

“Not if yours is a sample of the article.”

“You love Floy after a fashion, of course—

equably, respectfully, respectably," said Percy ; "but you would not kill yourself for her, commit any crime for her, dare anything and everything, so that she should be happy !"

"Well, not exactly," said Valentine, laughing once more ; "and, if only my crimes or my death could make her happy, why, all the better for me that I should be a cold-blooded fish whom her fascinations do not disturb. Look your fate in the face, Percy, and, if Helena is adamant, turn philosopher—you were half-way towards one before you knew her—and if she's not——"

"If she's not ! Oh, Val, you can't think—you don't think that there's a chance for me ?" cried Percy.

"It's impossible to say. Woman is an enigma," said Valentine. "In your place I would not give up the chase for a few cold words or looks."

"You would persevere?"

"To be sure."

"Thank you for saying that," said Percy, shaking hands violently with his friend—"for throwing on my gloomy future a ray of hope from your own cheery nature. Do you know, Val, I was even jealous of you half an hour

since, and must apologise for the absurdity of my suspicion. I did not like to see you two looking into each other's faces, as if there were an understanding between you in which no one else shared. It seemed the beginning of a new love, until I remembered my sister, and your affection for her, and what an honourable straightforward fellow you always have been."

Valentine was silent for a while.

"Thank you for the compliment, Percy," said Val, after a long pause; "I hope always to remember my duty to myself and my neighbour—even if my neighbour be a particularly pretty woman," he added, more lightly.

"I can't jest," said Percy, restlessly, as he flung himself into a chair again. "I fear that I am naturally a suspicious man."

"That hardly tallies with your confidence in one whom all the world once mistrusted—although you were certainly hard upon me."

"You suspected her then—you——"

"Don't let us rake up that miserable story," cried Valentine. "I was a vain prig, with faith in my own convictions; I have grown wiser lately. I shall be terribly wise before I die," he added, with a smile on his lips singularly in con-

trast to the furrow on his brow.

“You mean——”

“Hanged if I know what I mean!” he cried. “And now, Percy, what news of home and Weddercombe and Brute Barclay? Speak, Sir Oracle.”

Before Percy could communicate any news, Mrs. Merrick came bustling into the room, red and short of breath with repressed excitement.

Val sprang to his feet, for his mother was a grave and self-possessed woman as a rule.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, my dear child, nothing,” said Mrs. Merrick; “but that wicked, generous Helena—so foolish of her, so wrong—has—— Just look what I have found upon my dressing-table! I was going to dress and—oh! dear, we can’t go on like this, Helena and I—it’s very kind of her, but it upsets me dreadfully.”

She sat down and began to cry, and Valentine took from his mother’s hands a jewel-case, on which her initials were engraved, touched the spring, and looked with surprise and a half-angry regret at the clusters of diamonds glittering before him in the shape of brooch and earrings.

"It is a costly gift," he muttered; "but it will not do to pitch her wealth at us in this fashion."

"I told her that you would not like it," said his mother.

"It's payment for past services—for board, lodging, and washing—with an extra tip for extra troubles incurred," said Valentine; "and one feels small under the weight of so costly an obligation. It's——"

Valentine paused in his condemnatory criticism, for Helena had followed his mother into the room, and was now standing by her side, sorrowful and crestfallen.

"And it's exceedingly beautiful, and it's very kind of Mrs. Barclay," added Valentine, most lamely and impotently, by way of conclusion.

He was very sorry he had pained her; he could see that she was deeply mortified by words which he had not intended that she should hear.

"It is not in payment for past services that I ask your mother to accept my gift, Mr. Merrick," said Helena, looking down. "There are some services which are not to be repaid, and which we can only make an effort to return by

our devotion. I am sorry if I have done wrong ; I did not think of the value of my gift, believe me."

"No, you certainly did not think of the value," said Valentine, trying to laugh off the impression which he had made, "and you were too generous in consequence. What is the use of showering on this dear old soul a thousand pounds' worth of diamonds?"

"The jeweller said that they were exactly suitable for a birthday present," said Helena ; "and I got them a great bargain."

"My dear, there is no occasion to apologise," cried Mrs. Merrick, taking the case from her son's hands. "It's very, very generous of you ; and if I should never be able to wear them myself——"

"Never wear them !" cried Helena.

"Why, there's Valentine's wife to wear them for me some day," Mrs. Merrick concluded. "But oh, pray be more careful of your money for the future!"

"I hate money !" said Helena, fretfully. "Without it I should have been a happy woman years ago. Heaven meant me to be happy and poor and contented. What has wealth done

for me, that I should be careful lest I lose it?"

She passed swiftly from the room, and Mrs. Merrick turned to Valentine with dismay, and said,

"There, Val, that's all your fault."

"So it is," answered Valentine, ruefully. "I had no idea that she was so susceptible. What a couple of ungrateful brutes she must think us!—eh, Percy?"

"It was ungrateful in the extreme," said Percy.

"But she must not spend a fortune upon us," said Val, gravely. "What will people say, if we take such gifts as these, but that we are toadying the widow, and laying snares for her fortune?"

"Poor Helena! she is only a child, despite all her bitter experience of the world," said Mrs. Merrick.

"Did you see how grieved—how shocked even—she looked when you said that you would never wear her gift?" said Percy.

"Did she?" cried Mrs. Merrick. "Oh, how sorry I am!"

"Mother, you will oblige me by wearing your diamonds to-night," said Valentine, decisively.

"I think Helena will be pleased," said Mrs. Merrick; "but I shall be nervous and fidgety all the time that I have them on."

"Lest anybody should make a dash at them?" said her son. "I hope you are perfectly assured about the character of your guests?"

"I am quite sure about them," said Mrs. Merrick, almost loftily, at her son's insinuation.

"And the servants, and that ruffianly-looking young fellow downstairs whom I saw polishing the silver?"

"Why, that's our greengrocer's son, who's coming to assist!"

"I wonder if he's a judge of diamonds," said Valentine, so solemnly that his mother regarded him with horror, until he laughed at her dismay, and bade her remember that he was in the house to protect her.

"You have made me very nervous," exclaimed his mother; "I shall not be able to sleep in the house any more, with all this property to take care of. If there are any thieves in Richmond, they will be sure to hear of the diamonds, and there isn't a safe lock on any of the windows. I wish you hadn't, Val—I——"

"There, never mind me," said Valentine; "I

have come down here as a meddler and a marplot, I can see. I never did anything right. I'm a clumsy idiot—I always was."

"How can you call yourself such dreadful names?" said Mrs. Merrick, kissing her boy affectionately; and thus the episode of the diamonds was finished for a while. The story came up at a later hour again, and had its weight upon the turning-point of one man's life.

CHAPTER XIII.

A LITTLE PARTY.

MRS. MERRICK'S party was a success in its way, and was totally undeserving of the animadversions that had been passed upon it by an ungrateful son, who possibly preferred the latest fashion in party-giving. There was no formality, there was not much style; it was a social gathering of the old school, where the hostess exerted herself to render everybody comfortable, and was really glad to see her guests.

Mrs. Merrick was, after all, a lady—bustling, good-tempered, and full-hearted—and neither vulgarity nor bad taste usurped the place of the starchiness of the modern *conversazione*, or the heterogeneous “At Home,” where the poor bipeds are made to feel so unmistakably that they are “out.” It was a party such as

Mrs. Merrick had been in the habit of giving years ago, deep down in the country, when she and her husband were young, and had hosts of country squires and squiresses for friends and acquaintances; where people settled down to whist and loo, and port and sherry with their cards; where those sang who cared to sing, and were not deeply grieved if no one cared to listen; where hearts were light and nights were long, and where, in the small hours, tables and couches and chairs would find their way into a heap, and extempore quadrilles would be struck up on the carpet, to the happiness of all young folk with light hearts and light heels.

Mrs. Merrick had good friends at Richmond to summon round her on the present occasion, and she understood the rare art of assimilating her guests, and of rendering them content with the amusement she proffered. There was not a bull-frog amongst them to blow out his importance, in the vain hope of looking bigger than the rest of the company; and no one felt awkward because Mr. Merrick was the rising barrister, or Percy Andison was heir to a baronetcy—both were gentlemen who adapted themselves very pleasantly to their surroundings, and put them-

selves out of the way to set other people at their ease, as gentlemen will do, whilst the prigs and the frogs go on with their blowing.

Valentine, as has been intimated, did not care for a party of this description ; he felt that he had outgrown it, and that his mother's guests were no longer of his circle. He was of the new world, where there is more starch and less fun, and the new world agreed with him, and did not rub his fur the wrong way quite so often ; but no one but Percy Andison had the faintest suspicion that he was acting a part, and endeavouring to appear delighted with everything. Val forgot that he was acting after a while, and presently he even began to discover that he was enjoying himself, and that it was remarkably pleasant to talk to Helena Barclay, and to watch her efforts to second his mother's praiseworthy endeavours to amuse. It was Helena Barclay in a new character, with more light upon her, and more animation—a fair, bright, ethereal young woman, stepping for a while from the shadows of her past and forgetting them, the roses deepening on her cheeks, the dark eyes flashing with her brighter thoughts and with the reflex of the fairer world before her.

"How beautiful she is!" said Percy Andison in Val's ear. "How different from all the rest!"

"Yes, she is very different," Val assented.

"What a laugh of silvery harmony, Val! I have never heard her laugh before," cried Percy, with still greater enthusiasm.

"Nor I."

"Who's the man, all white tie and long teeth, Val, that follows her about? I don't like him, at all," muttered Percy.

"He's an obtrusive beast, and I object to him myself," Val answered; "but she only tolerates him, thank Heaven!"

"Why 'thank Heaven'?"

"I should not like Helena Barclay to be snapped up by a fellow of that description," was the reply.

"Certainly not."

"She must marry a gentleman—some one who will care for her alone, and never give a thought to the money that she has."

"Ah!" said Percy, "is there anyone of that character about?"

"Do you doubt that anyone is capable of such a romantic weakness?" cried Val. "By George, I'll tell her what you say!"

"For mercy's sake, don't!" gasped forth the deeply-smitten Percy, not alive to the humour of the idea, and only sensible of the rashness of his friend, as Val sprang up and walked across the room to where Helena was sitting.

Presently he came back, and said,

"Mrs. Barclay will be very happy."

"Happy to do what?" inquired Percy.

"Take you for a partner at a rubber at whist. I have just knocked up another party of four."

"Oh, thank you, Val; there's a good fellow; that's like a true friend. You join us?"

"No. I wander to and fro, a spirit perturbed, and see after the general requirements of the company. I am in my mother's service. I am going to step out of the room in a minute, and make sure that the cook has turned out the jellies properly. I am never easy in my mind till the jellies are set, and the blanc-mange has done shaking. So you needn't begin to bawl out 'Where's Valentine?' when I'm missing from the festive scene."

Percy stared at him. He was a dull hand at a joke, and the forced gravity of his friend deceived him. He hurried away to the new whist-table that had been set up, and quickly forgot

all about Valentine, and was totally oblivious of the fact that Valentine watched him and Helena very attentively, and for a considerable period of time—watched them with a sadness of observation that struck one person in the room, who came and laid a hand upon his arm very lovingly and tenderly.

“What is the matter, Val? Are you getting tired of us that you grow so full of thought?” asked his mother.

“On the contrary, I am as happy as I can be,” said Valentine. “I would not change the scene or the company for the Temple and my chambers for—six-and-eightpence.”

“Really happy, Val?”

“Really,” was the confident reply.

“I am very glad. I was afraid that you were getting tired of us,” said the mother. “And you were looking terribly grave, sir.”

“See what awful swells you all are,” Val answered, “and here are Percy and I in frock-coats, and with neck-ties like chest plaisters. Isn’t it enough to make anybody grave?”

“Oh, it’s not that. Here we are not strictly in full dress.”

“And you tell me that—a woman blazing with diamonds!” said he,

“Why, you insisted that——”

“So I did. Don’t go into that question, mother, but tell me what they all say about them? Hasn’t the birthday present been a sensation amongst the guests?”

“Yes,” replied his mother, smiling.

“I thought it would be—the dowagers envy you, and all the young men have made up their minds to propose to the heiress as speedily as possible. See how they are dodging about her table, thirsting for a word or a smile from her; and look how old Percy is glowering at them in his fury. “Ten to one,” said the son, “old butter-teeth proposes before the *soirée*kin is over.”

“Good gracious, Valentine!—who’s ‘old butter-teeth’?” cried his mother, shocked at our hero’s exclamation,; “and what’s a *soir-ée*kin?”

Valentine did not stop to explain; he had succeeded in his object of creating a diversion from the subject-matter of his own grave looks, and he walked away to the whist-table, and stood watching the game more closely, until Helena Barclay became aware of his presence. Then he remembered that he was in the habit

of startling her, and so crossed the room again, and turned over the leaves of the music for a young lady who had been already half-an-hour torturing an inoffensive piano.

He played a hand at whist after this, and it was not till close upon the supper that he found himself disengaged, and Helena Barclay seeking him out with flattering persistency.

"Your mother tells me that you and Mr. Andison are going home by the last train," she said.

"Or by the first cab which we can catch," he answered; "for we are not doing any good here, being neither useful nor ornamental."

"You are tired of us all; it is what you gentlemen call 'slow'."

"And Percy and I are horribly fast," he added.

"Percy Andison does not wish to leave us so quickly," she said.

"How very strange!" said Valentine, with affected astonishment. "Well, I will leave him in good hands, and take my way Londonwards alone. Yes, I should have thought of that before."

"Thought of what?" Helena inquired.

"That he would be glad to remain—that here is happiness, from which my selfishness would wrench him away," said Val. "Don't say a word, and I will slip off presently, with never a soul the wiser for my flitting."

"Yes, you are in a great hurry to be gone," said Helena curiously.

"And strangely unmindful of my promise this afternoon," added Valentine.

"I think so," said Helena.

"But Percy——"

"Why do you talk to me so much about Mr. Andison?" cried Helena. "What has that weak eccentric young man to do with me, or with the question of your leaving your mother's house surreptitiously?"

"He is happy here, and I am not—shall I say that?"

"If it is the truth," replied Helena, sadly.

"Upon my word I will not swear to it," said Val, laughing—"only to the first half of it—for he *is* happy to-night."

"Is he?" was the indifferent rejoinder.

"Why should he not be? What more has he to desire?" asked Val. "You are present, and he came to Richmond to see you."

“He has told you that?”

“I did not require the information to be imparted to me,” Val answered. “You know his secret as well as I, Mrs. Barclay.”

“Yes—I was the first to learn it.”

“At a time when——”

“Please don’t!” cried Helena, and the colour flickered from her cheeks again. “The time is no more forgotten than that poor rash fellow’s chivalry. I shall always like Percy Andison, but——”

“But?” echoed Valentine.

“But I shall never do more than like him,” was the firm reply.

“There is no telling,” was the sceptical answer. “Instances have occurred in history of ladies changing their minds, and opening their hearts to the suitors whom for years they have affected to despise.”

“I esteem Percy Andison—I do not despise him.”

“So much the better for his chance.”

“You are strangely interested in your friend, Mr. Merrick,” said Helena, with a flash of her new petulance exhibiting itself. “Can you possibly think that his happiness or mine would be en-

hanced by marriage? You must not mind my speaking frankly on this subject. I should be glad to be quit of it at once and for ever. Why do you wish me to encourage Mr. Andison?"

Valentine was silent. He was unprepared for her peremptory demand; and her impatience, and even her anger, pleased him by the new phases of character which they presented.

"You are dumb," she said, almost scornfully.

"I am considering whether I have weighed the matter," said Valentine; "I suppose I have—I think so. Yes, Mrs. Barclay, I should like you to marry Percy Andison."

"You have said that already, Mr. Merrick, What for?" was the quick reply. "Because I am an intruder in your mother's house, and insult her by my vulgar display of the riches which have wrecked me?"

"Oh, don't think that—you whom my mother loves so much," cried Val.

"Does she love me? Has she said so to you?" said Helena, eagerly.

"Yes,"

"Well, then, here is home—why should I want another? Why should I seek another, when here are peace and rest and affection?"

"Time will roll on," said Valentine; "there must come a day when you and I will miss the dear old face, and you will be standing alone in the world—a fair woman haunted by false friends."

"False friends?"

"People who will dog you for your money's sake, and whose professions of attachment may deceive you," replied Val, "it is for that reason that I would see you married to one whose love for you is genuine, who is a scholar and a gentleman, and whose position in society will be a high one."

"He is your friend and confidant?" asked Helena, sharply.

"He is my friend—I am hardly in his confidence, but——"

"But he has spoken of me to you, as he would speak to half a hundred of his acquaintances in the fulness of his foolish heart," she cried. "Spare him and me, Mr. Merrick. by telling him that his friendship I would value if I were assured that that love of which you speak would not affront me. Tell him that I shall never marry again—I have made up my mind—I have sworn it!"

“Rash young woman,” said the barrister, jestingly; but her lips did not return the smile which had parted his.

“I shall never marry again,” affirmed Helena.

“You will die a solitary old woman, and bequeath your money to the institution for decayed Yorkshire widows who have not remarried on principle. You——”

“Mr. Merrick!” cried Helena; and then she swept past him, thoroughly indignant at last, and the opportunity for his apologising and making his peace with her came not again, despite his efforts, till a later hour of the night.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BALCONY.

THE opportunity for Valentine's peace-making came after supper, when there had been some speech-making, and "butter-teeth" had taken the liberty of proposing the health of Mrs. Merrick, and of alluding in too marked a manner to the grace and beauty and generosity—especially the generosity—of Mrs. Merrick's friend; and when Mrs. Merrick's health had been drunk in champagne, and the guests had returned to the drawing-room, and begun, some of them, to dance down the supper, or to shake it into concrete on the chest, according to the powers of their respective digestions.

Helena had been asked to dance several times, and had graciously but firmly refused. She took a pleasure in watching the dancers, but she was immovable herself—Percy, and the youth

with the big teeth in particular, attempting in vain to lure her from her seat, and Mrs. Merrick being brought in as special intercessor without the least effect.

“I don’t like to vex her by too much pleading for a dance, Val,” Percy said; “I feel that I am becoming a nuisance to her already.”

“Very likely,” answered Valentine.

“But is life to be always like this with her?”

“How the deuce can I tell?” was the short answer.

Percy was surprised at Val’s replies, but he took them for part of his dry habit of rejoinder rather than as any exhibition of ill-temper which it might have been, for Val had lost his train, and there was not a cab in Richmond, although he had certainly made no effort to catch one or another of them.

“She has become very dull too; she was crying a few minutes since,” said Percy. “I saw her dry her eyes several times when she thought no one was looking. I wish that you would find out what is the matter, Val. If I have offended her in any way unintentionally—if I pain her by staying too late—if I have done or said anything—if——”

“Hold hard, Percy ! I understand your instructions ; don’t go on with any more of them. Where is she ?”

“She went out on the balcony a short time since with your mother.”

“All right,”

Valentine walked at once to the balcony, running along the back of the house, where the Thames wound its way beyond through a fair landscape. The drawing-room windows were open, for the night was warm, and the room had become hot with the gas and the guests.

Outside on the balcony he discovered his mother and Helena, as the ever-watchful Percy had apprised him ; and Helena was being folded in the arms of Mrs. Merrick, who was evidently consoling her beneath a passion of tears which had escaped her at last.

“What has happened ?” cried Valentine. “Is Mrs. Barclay unwell ? What is it ?”

“Nothing, Valentine—nothing,” said Mrs. Merrick ; “go away, there’s a dear boy, or we shall have the company out after you. I ought to have known better than to drag Helena into all this excitement and worry, for she is not

strong, and a little unnerves her. The party has been too much for her."

"No, it has not," said Helena, suddenly starting from the motherly embrace of Mrs. Merrick, dashing the tears rapidly from her face, and shaking back her raven hair. "I am very well—I am not weak—I am a strong woman, thank Heaven. Is it likely that anything said or done to-night could disturb one who has fought through many terrible disasters? Let us go back to the drawing-room, please."

"Mrs. Barclay, if anything that I have said, in my rudeness and thoughtlessness, has affected you—and I feel that I have been very rude to-night—pray forgive me," pleaded Valentine.

"It was not you—that is, not all you," said Helena, gently; "there have been so many little tiresome things to disturb me, and I have been vexed because people saw that I was vexed. There!"

Mrs. Merrick laughed pleasantly.

"So it was my wicked and sly son who was at the bottom of all this mischief!" cried Mrs. Merrick. "There, make your peace together, you couple of silly children, that never meet without wrangling. You are both old enough

to know better, surely ; but you will not understand each other till you come more often, Val, to Richmond."

Mrs. Merrick left them together. She had faith in them both, and she was sure that they did not like each other so well as they might. Valentine was an obstinate and aggravating young man, and Helena's nature was a variable April disposition—albeit always lovable and true.

"Let us follow your mother," said Helena, shivering ; " the night air blows keenly from the river."

"It is my hateful presence, and not the night air, that makes you shudder, Mrs. Barclay," said Valentine, sorrowfully ; " it is the old feeling of which you spoke this afternoon, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"No, it is not that. I have been very foolish to-night. I hoped to keep strong till I got to my room. Please let us return now, Mr. Merrick."

"One moment," said Valentine ; "you have half confessed that I was unkind this evening—or, at all events, that I was unlucky enough to displease you."

"Think no more of that."

“I ask your pardon, Mrs. Barclay. I never in all my life wish to wound you by a word, but my odd temper or my high spirits carry me away sometimes. I persecuted you too cruelly at Weddercombe not to feel that you have every claim upon my esteem now. I would do anything in the world to spare you, and to make amends for a past in which I estimated you and your motives with a terrible injustice. I said as much as this before, when you were lying ill,” he added, “and I thought that you understood me then, and would always to the end. Forgive me.”

Her fair white hands went up quickly to her face, and hid it from him. She was crying again, and essayed to conceal her weakness from his observation, if it were possible.

“You do not think that I have acted kindly—you cannot pardon me, Helena?” he cried, misunderstanding her himself in his new impulse.

“Yes, yes, I forgive—such a little matter as it is to forgive, too—a mere jest, which you own was without any intention to wound me,” she cried, lowering her hands and extending them to him—“that is it?”

"Of course it is," he answered.

"It is the old suspicion that tells me you dislike me when you are hard upon me," she murmured.

"Was not that satisfactorily explained this afternoon?" asked Valentine.

"And dissatisfactorily dissipated this evening," said Helena, with a faint smile, "when you were sarcastic, and teased me about Percy Andison."

"I am sorry that I teased you. It was advice well-meant."

"But you will not offer it to me again?"

"No."

"You will not mention Percy's name to me ever again? Let others do that—I can make them out better than you."

"I will not mention Percy's name again, if it offend you."

The curtains of the window which opened on the balcony parted, and two white hands held them for a moment aside, as if to allow of the egress of the owner, a third person, to the night air, and then the hands dropped back, and the heavy curtains closed between the drawing-room and the balcony on which those two

strange irreconcilable beings lingered. Neither had seen this intention of some one to join them, and Valentine said,

“We are friends, then?”

“We are never likely to be enemies, I hope,” answered Helena. “Shall we return?”

“If you are strong enough—well enough.”

“I am afraid that I am looking pale and red-eyed. I suppose half a score of people will ask me what is the matter.”

“Hark!” said Valentine, “they are playing a waltz within. Of course you dance?”

“I danced once—when I was a girl.”

“Let us slip through these curtains and join the dancers. You would not mind dancing with me—just for once—for a moment or two, by way of exercise.”

Helena seemed to shrink away from him; and he saw it, and said, quickly,

“Yes, I am your enemy, not the son of your best friend—the brother, as I ought to be now. You are afraid of me?”

“No, I am not.”

“Will you allow me the honour of your hand for the next dance, Mrs. Barclay?” said Valentine, with a low and solemn bow.

Helena did not answer, but she placed her hand hesitatingly within his own, and the instant afterwards they had glided through the curtains of the room, joined the dancers, and were whirling round to the music which “butter-teeth” had kindly volunteered to play.

It was a wild and furious waltz, for the player had gone vigorously at it; but Valentine and Helena were good dancers, and had, in their dancing days—which, oddly enough, both thought were over for good, young as they were—loved dancing for its own sake. It was a happy whirl of ideas, in which they grew confused and forgetful—wherein the old world sank away and this became a new one, full of life and colour, changing with the moment, as scenes change from gloom to brightness in a fairy piece. Helena knew not of York and of York Assizes, and her past terrible associations with the man who held her to his heart; and he (Valentine Merrick) utterly forgot a fair-haired girl down at Hernley, whom he had asked to be his wife, knowing what a dear little girl she was, and—ah! miserable addendum—not forgetting either what a capital “catch” in every respect she would be!

The dance was over—it passed away like a dream; but Helena and Val walked to and fro in dreamland still, better friends than they had ever been, and yet not reading each other's hearts any more clearly—believing in each other a little more, trusting in each other more completely, but still densely ignorant of a truth which might grow strong some day, if their watch were not vigilant and their hearts not sound to the core. They knew not what might be approaching, step by step, towards their lives, for neither was designing, and both were ingenuous and young; but there was a pleasant satisfaction in knowing that they were friends, better friends from that night, and from that strange dance together.

“I am afraid that I shall have to walk to London to-night, unless any Samaritan is going my way in a carriage,” said Val.

“These are all Richmond friends,” said Helena.

“That's awkward.”

“Is there any necessity for your being in town so soon to-morrow?” asked Helena.

“Every day has its work for me—and I like to begin work early. I said that I would go home, if you remember?”

“I remember that you promised me this afternoon that this should be more like home again,” said Helena—“that I should not frighten you away.

“So I did,” answered Valentine; “and the mother told me that my old room was always ready for me, waiting for the return of the prodigal. And you don’t frighten me so very much! Shall I stay—for the mother’s sake?”

“Yes,” answered Helena.

Valentine said no more about reaching town, discoursed no further upon the past or the future—sufficient for the night and its late hours was the pleasure that had suddenly sprung to him, and for which he did not try to account.

It was a happy evening—what a capital party it had been!—no formality, no nonsense about it; no envy, evil-speaking, or uncharitableness—everything flowing on peacefully and harmoniously, with a sense of enjoyment stamped upon everybody’s speaking countenance. Why had he shunned society of this description so long—he who should have known better, and been immeasurably above the tyranny of custom and rule?

Suddenly, in the midst of his self-complacency,

he remembered Percy Andison, and looked round the room for him.

The Baronet's son was nowhere to be seen, and it was not till Mrs. Merrick had informed Valentine that Percy had left two hours since, and had taken his departure in a hurried manner, and with a cold good night and thanks, that Valentine Merrick awakened from his dream to the consciousness of how late it was, and of how swiftly time had flown by with him!

CHAPTER XV.

THE SULKS.

AFTER all, Helena Barclay had not wholly recovered from the shock which Fate had hurled at her young life. It was more than possible that Mrs. Merrick's quiet and old-fashioned party had been a dash into society for which her timid nature was unfitted, and that, in striving to be as joyful as the occasion necessitated, she had overtasked her strength.

There was no serious illness anticipated—no falling back to the old prostration to which Jane Graves's confession had once reduced her—but Helena Barclay was weak and faint the following day, and Mrs. Merrick was nervous in consequence. Her prostration rendered Valentine nervous also; the old fears, the old sense of having helped towards her illness, kept him

at Richmond, watchful and restless, and he was talking about medical advice and telegraphing for some one, when Helena came into the room to set her interdict upon his intentions.

This was in the evening, and Valentine had been all day at Richmond.

"I am better now—much better," she said, in answer to Valentine's eager questions; "the late hours fatigued me—that was all."

"You are sure that you are better?"

"I am quite well, thank you," said Helena.

"I must take more care of you, my dear, now that I know what a fragile plant you are," said Mrs. Merrick; "we will have no more parties."

"I hope you will. I enjoyed the change very much."

"You will excuse me, Helena," said Mrs. Merrick. "but you did not appear to be enjoying yourself when I took you out on the balcony."

"My head ached—that was all. Why, I danced afterwards with your son! Think of me with a heart light enough to dance!"

"Yes, you certainly surprised me then," said Mrs. Merrick; "and to think of your waltzing too, Val!"

"I hardly believe it," said Valentine. "I expect to wake up presently in the Temple. It's a dream to have danced—it's a dream to be here."

"Have you been here all day?" asked Helena, wonderingly.

"Yes."

"I thought that every day had its work in town," said Helena.

Valentine coloured to the roots of his hair—not from any embarrassment, but from the pleasurable consciousness that she remembered every word which he had spoken last night.

"So it has," answered Val, "but upon an emergency it is possible to roll two days into one. I did not care about going to town to-day."

She looked at him as if with a new and sudden question on her lips, and then looked away again with as much alacrity, and said not a word. He felt that she was going to ask him why he had remained at Richmond, and that, guessing at it, she preferred to keep silent, and to brood upon this new exhibition of eccentricity.

"Percy Andison will wonder where you are

to-day," said his mother, "if he calls at the Temple."

"No, he will not. I telegraphed to my clerk this morning that I was here. If the noble Percy desires my company, he knows where to find me."

"Then we may expect him this evening?" said Mrs. Merrick. "That will make a pleasant party of four, to be sure."

"You are always thinking of parties, mother, although last night you nearly killed our friend," said Valentine.

"What a dreadful accusation to make! As if I could not express a wish that Mr. Andison should drop in without your reproaches, child," said Mrs. Merrick, "and as if we should not be glad to see Percy! Oh, Helena, don't look so grave! You would not be sorry, for one, I am sure."

Mrs. Merrick shook her lace cap, and laughed at Helena. She was a woman who had faith in the power of Percy Andison's attentions, who thought that it would come to a match some day, between the Baronet's son and the beautiful widow. She had jested before at Percy's attentions in Yorkshire, and Helena had borne

her sallies with equanimity, but this evening her smile was faint and forced.

“I hope that Mr. Andison will not come to-night,” she said very decisively.

Valentine did not take part in the conversation—did not speak for or against his friend. He remembered his promise of last night on the balcony, and he was sure that she remembered it, and was grateful for his reticence.

It was strange also, although he did not stop to consider the matter deeply, but he was sure that he would have felt a certain amount of disappointment if Percy Andison had intruded upon the peace of that evening. He desired to feel again what home was like—how he could settle down to it when he came more regularly to Richmond—how he should like the peaceful humdrum existence away from his law books and his dusty hermitage near Garden Court. He had promised to come more frequently; he was sure that he should not find it particularly irksome to keep his promise.

There was something strangely pleasant and comfortable in his new home. Here was a good mother, who made much of him, and whom

he made happy by his presence; here was his mother's friend—a new character to study, a new friend to make for himself. She was afraid of him—almost disliked him—but, for last year's sake, he would be glad to conquer her fear and dislike. It would be easily conquered, as she knew that he wished to stand higher in her estimation than he had hitherto done. Certainly their acquaintance had been made strangely and awfully; but the old dark days had rolled back like a scroll.

“Ah, this is comfortable,” said Mrs. Merrick, with a happy sigh—the lamp was lighted, and the curtains were drawn—“to see you, Val, in your old place. You always fancied that big arm-chair—your dear father's chair; and I cannot imagine that the days have gone by, and made you famous, since you sat there in your school holidays.”

“Not famous,” said Val, “but a man who gets his crust, although there are fifty hands clutching at it along with his.”

“It's a terrible fight to gain a position at the Bar, Helena,” Mrs. Merrick explained.

“Yes, I know,” said Helena, in a low, forced voice; and this reminded Valentine that he had

intruded upon a dangerous subject. Helena Barclay didn't care to talk of the law—it had nearly hanged her once!—or of Valentine's skill as a pleader; it had been forcibly impressed upon her two years since.

“You used to read so beautifully to me whilst I worked, Val—don't you remember?” said his mother, by way of a hint, as she opened her work-table.

“I used to read you off to sleep.”

“My dear Val, how absurd!”

“I don't mind reading again if it will not bore Mrs. Barclay,” said Val.

“I should be glad to listen,” answered Helena, with politeness and with truth.

“What shall I read? I saw Tennyson's new poem on the table yesterday. Have you looked at it?”

Neither of the ladies had looked at the poem, and Valentine Merrick went in search of it, found it, resumed his place in the big easy-chair, and dived into the subject. The barrister not only read well, but read with an expression which showed that he realised the feelings and passion of the poet. In the Law Courts he was an eloquent speaker; at home he was a clever

elocutionist; and his deep rich voice rang out with emphatic force to the undying word-music of one of Tennyson's idylls.

Helena Barclay winced, to begin with, at the first elevation of his voice; her hands stole upwards to her heart—they were the old tones which had turned her into marble at York, and had sounded in her ears like the promulgation of her death-warrant—but his eyes were fixed on the page, and presently her hands dropped to her lap, and she listened with an eager interest, spell-bound by the poet and the poet's exponent.

It was a grand reading, that might have done for a platform and a public beyond it, but it was too much for honest Mrs. Merrick. She had never been able to resist the soothing influence of the human voice—her work was uninteresting, and she had kept late hours last night—and as the story progressed, the grey curls and the lace cap began to dip slowly forward over her woofs as if the handsome old head were keeping time to the metre of the legend.

Val knew what had happened, but he read on to the end of the first idyll without comment, by which time he discovered Helena to be watch-

ing him with her eyes about twice as large as he had hitherto seen them, and with his mother's sealed in a deep and refreshing sleep from which he made no effort to arouse her.

"There—what did I say before I began?" he exclaimed, laughing softly, as he pointed to his mother.

Helena started, and broke away from the spell.

"She is tired out," Helena answered, in the half-low tone which he had adopted.

"It is the penalty for late hours and birthday-parties," said Val, closing his book.

"May I compliment you on your reading?"

"Certainly. I am as vain as a peacock already, though."

"But you read with that power and force which come to only a few. If I could only read like that!"

"Thank you," said Valentine; "but spare my blushes, and let us get back to business whilst *mater-familias* dreams that a Knight of the Round Table has come to her party."

"Business?" repeated Helena.

"You told me yesterday that you wished to

consult me upon the meaning of the box which——”

“Not to-night,” said Helena, shuddering; “I had forgotten that I had told you—I had escaped the past until you spoke to me.”

“I am very sorry that I have blundered on a subject which is painful,” said Valentine humbly, “but you have discovered long ago that I am naturally a blunderer.”

“I did speak of this in the boat,” said Helena, thoughtfully, “and I want your advice, Mr. Merriek—but then bad news will keep.”

“Not bad news, I hope.”

“Was there ever a good thought or motive that came from Downton Vale? It is an evil and an awful place, where fair hopes die—where mine did.”

“And it is from Downton Vale, then, that there comes a clue to the little mystery which has baffled us?”

“I will not think of it to-night,” cried Helena, feverishly; “pray talk of home—of her; pray read again, if you will—to oblige me.”

“Oh, do, Val dear,” said his mother, with wonderful presence of mind, and an admirable assumption of a general comprehension of de-

tails; "it is not late, and Tennyson is always charming."

"I thought that you would like the poem," said Val, as he took up the book again: "how charmingly that race for the gold cup was described, mother!"

Mrs. Merrick fell into the trap which a designing son had set for her.

"It was indeed," she said, complacently.

"And for the coat and badge—you remember Doggett?"

Mrs. Merrick inclined her head, but did not commit herself to any fresh opinion upon this occasion; a suspicion that her son was testing her memory was stealing to her by degrees, born of his grave looks and Helena's efforts to repress a smile.

The reader did not continue his tests of memory, but dashed into his second idyll without another word; and again Helena Barclay forgot her own life in the lives of King Arthur's heroes, and once more the lace cap and the grey head went softly to and fro, after a hard fight against circumstances.

It was destined, however, that Valentine Merrick's efforts to amuse, and his worthy mother's

peaceful slumbers, should be summarily dissipated on that occasion, for half-way in the poem there came a loud knocking at the door, and a clanging of the visitors' bell, that cut short the reading, and frightened the sleeper into half a fit and a violent palpitation of the heart.

"Mercy upon us!—What is it! Something's on fire—somebody's run over in the street!" exclaimed Mrs. Merrick.

"I have an idea that that's Percy Andison," said Valentine, coolly.

There was a shade of disappointment on Helena's face, which did not soften sufficiently into welcome, as, true to Valentine's prophecy, Percy Andison was ushered into the drawing-room, hat in hand, like a man who was off again in a minute.

He was not particularly full of smiles himself, it was apparent, although he shook hands stiffly with the triumvirate whom he had startled by his late appearance.

"You are still here, then?" he said to Valentine, with even a touch of acerbity in his voice.

"Yes, I am still here. Where else should I be? Where else, Percy, have I a greater right

to be?" asked Valentine, regarding his friend unflinchingly.

"Nowhere," answered Percy, with some embarrassment; "but you were expected at the Temple this morning, and your clerk could hardly understand the telegram."

"I am not answerable for the comprehension of my clerk," replied Valentine, "and I was not expected at the Temple."

"It is Val's first holiday for months," said Mrs. Merrick.

"Which I hope no one envies me," added her son.

"N-no, Val, no," said Percy, in a hesitating manner; "if you mean me, certainly not."

"Will you not put down your hat? Shall the servant——"

"Thank you, Mrs. Merrick," replied Percy, "but I shall miss the train if I remain many minutes, and I go back to Hernley to-morrow morning."

He glanced at Helena, who did not appear particularly sorry.

"So soon!" said Valentine to his mother, however.

"This has not been a pleasure-trip, but a

mission on Sir Charles's business," said Percy ; "I hope shortly to make a longer stay in London. I—I thought that I would not return to Hernley without coming to see you all for a few moments again."

"You are very kind," said Mrs. Merrick.

"I am afraid that I left your house uncere-
moniously last night ; but I was tired and—
ill."

"Ill !" exclaimed the three this time.

"A sudden giddiness—an odd feeling which I do not remember to have experienced before," Percy condescended to explain more fully.

"I hope it was not the wine at supper, Percy?" said Valentine ; but Percy did not perceive the joke, or would not smile at it if he did.

"I wondered where you had gone," Val continued. "How did you reach London?"

"I walked to town."

"From Richmond!—you who hate walking, and felt ill!" exclaimed Val.

"I did not mind the distance," was the answer, as he rose from the chair that had been placed for him, and began shaking hands again.

"Good-bye. Are there any commands for Hernley, Mrs. Barclay—Val?"

"My love to Florence—my hope that I shall see her very shortly," said Helena.

"I will deliver your kind message."

He turned to Valentine as if for his message also—and there was so anxious a look upon his face that Valentine guessed at a great deal of the truth of the expression.

"I will tell you when we are on our way to town."

"You return to-night?" Percy asked in surprise.

"Yes, I return to-night."

"My dear Val," began his mother, "I thought that at least till to-morrow you——"

"One day's clear holiday must be enough for me for the present, but—" he could not refrain from looking at Helena, "I shall never keep away so long again. Good-bye, mother—I haven't a minute to lose. The last train leaves at 10-50."

He kissed his mother, he shook hands with Helena Barclay, and then he went away with his friend, Mrs. Merrick and Helena looking after them from the open doorway.

"I had no idea that he was going this evening," said Mrs. Merrick; "did he say anything to you about it, Helena."

“Not a word.”

“I believe that he has just made up his mind,” said the mother. “Oh, dear, I wonder if those two boys are going anywhere to-night; and don’t want us to know. I wonder if that Percy Andison is as steady a young man as he seems. He has certainly dragged my Val out of the house.”

“No,” said Helena, with a half sigh; “your son was glad to get away to business in the Temple. He’s happier there than here.”

“My dear Helena, don’t you think that Valentine is happy here?”

“Yes, in his way, perhaps; but is he as happy as he should be with all that he wishes in the world before him?”

“His is a very contented disposition, Helena.”

“I am glad,” replied Helena Barclay; “you know him so much better than I; and I feel that he deserves to be happy, being a persevering, clever, honourable gentleman. But don’t blame me, mamma, as he does,” Helena said, adopting the title by which she had always called Mrs. Merrick since her illness, “if it will never be beyond my power to understand him.”

“But not to like him—for my sake?”

“I like him for his own,” answered Helena frankly and honestly ; and then the two women closed the door on the “two boys,” who had long since been lost on the dark road beyond the villa.

CHAPTER XVI.

EXPLANATION.

THE barrister and the Baronet's son caught the South-Western train by little more than half a minute, and were carried thoughtfully, and almost sulkily, to town together. Valentine was certain that something was wrong with his friend, that there had been a motive for Percy's departure from his mother's house last night and for his appearance, as sudden and unlooked for, that evening ; but he left it for Percy to explain, which, however, that young gentleman did not offer to do.

With the exception of a few words on passing matters as they walked to Richmond station, no confidences had been exchanged, and each settled himself into a corner of the first-class compartment that had been selected, tilted his hat over his brows, folded his arms on his chest,

and affected to sleep, or to be too deeply occupied with his own thoughts to care for those of his neighbour.

Valentine Merrick considered himself the aggrieved party—supposing that there was any grievance in question—and was in no mood on that particular evening to make the first advances. He knew what was the matter as plainly as if Percy had already burst forth with his catalogue of grievances, but he considered that, after all that had been said between them, no further explanation was consistent with his dignity. He was above explaining now, as he should have been above any fresh suspicions of Percy Andison. He could not go on through life continually clearing up his motives to people of a distrustful turn of mind; he had been always confided in to the utmost, and this was a new experience, to which he objected, which he even felt disposed to resent. He was in an unamiable mood for some reason or other, completely at variance with the pleasant domestic evening which he had passed; but his better temper rose to the surface by degrees as the train sped on towards the city which he loved. After all Percy was almost a boy, quite a boy in

some of his ideas and in his knowledge of life ; he was in love with Helena Barclay, and as wild and inconsistent as lovers are at his age—and above all he was Floy Andison's brother. Why should he, Val Merrick, a man of strong mind and nerve and experience of life—oh ! that foolish life's experience on which this vain young fellow plumed himself—sulk like a girl because another man was as glum as a ghoul, and a few words would explain everything ? Why should this other man go back to Hernley with a false impression of him, possibly the victim of another craze ? He leaned forward suddenly, and looked into Percy's face.

“Now, then, what's the new calamity ?” he asked.

“I am not aware that any calamity has occurred,” replied Percy.

“You're sullen and ferocious under an imaginary affront. What is the nature of it ?”

“Am I compelled to explain my moods to everybody ?”

“No, but you are to me, if you think that Helena Barclay or I have offended you,” answered Val.

“What has she to do with it ? And, if she

had, why should you be called in as umpire?" asked Percy.

"Because she is my mother's friend—a guest in my mother's house."

"She has not offended me," said Percy, slowly.

"Then I have."

"Well, yes."

"Fire away, old fellow!" cried Val. "This is a dangerous and complicated case of yours, if you are jealous again—if you do not understand Val Merrick better after all that I said yesterday, and after all the years that we have known each other."

"I know that Helena Barclay is a beautiful woman, and that she likes you."

"On the contrary, she dislikes me exceedingly."

"She has become an attraction at your mother's house," continued Percy. "You go there often, and stay there frequently; she is your mother's friend, and to you she is a fascination, which it is beyond your power to resist. I see it all!"

"I go so seldom to Richmond that my absence has become a grief to that mother!"

Valentine condescended to explain still further, though he frowned at the necessity for so doing; "I have not been for weeks, for months, before my mother's birthday. I am not called upon to offer this explanation of my movements to you, Percy; and it is alone for old time's sake that I do it; but bear in mind, if you will—if you please, that it is for the last time."

"You danced with her—she who professed to have given up dancing, and to have a horror of it, waltzed with you at once!"

"Have I not said that she is afraid of me?—that she was afraid to say 'No,' lest, like an ogre, I should gobble her up?" said Valentine, ironically.

He had grown tired of attempting to conciliate Percy, and was drifting into an aggravating mood, that was not calculated to bridge over the little difficulty—the smallest gulf—that lay between them.

"I do not believe in her fear, Val—I wish I did," he added, so mournfully that Val's manner changed again.

"She told me yesterday that she had been afraid of me from the terrible day on which she

was tried for her life, and when I pleaded against all mercy for her," said Valentine, earnestly; "and that is a terrible thought, which I would remove from her mind—and," he added, "without my best friends being uncharitable enough to misconstrue my motives."

"Val," cried Percy, impulsively, "I am wrong. Give me your hand, if you are not wholly ashamed of me."

The two men shook hands together.

"I can't help it, I suppose," said Percy, ruefully; "but, when I see anyone with her, anyone on whom she smiles, I lose my head—I jump at conclusions—I suspect everybody. It was no business of mine; I am nothing to her—I can be nothing to her—never, never!" he groaned forth. "But to see your arm round her, to know that you promised a few minutes before that dance never to speak of me again to her, to be sure that there was a confidence, an understanding between you which I did not share—was sufficient to drive me mad. That's all."

"It's rather too much," said Valentine, caustically; "but how did you know——"

"I was coming to you on the balcony. I

heard her beseech you never to mention my hateful name again."

"She did not say anything about a hateful name that I remember," said Valentine. "I had offended her at an earlier hour by intimating too forcibly that you and she were a fitting couple, and I had followed her to the balcony to make my peace. In fighting your cause I overstepped the mark, and nearly made enemies of the two of you, after the rule governing officious people."

"And it will be a favour to her never to mention my name again," said Percy, very gloomily.

"She said so; but then she was angry, and there are others who are not likely to let you drop."

"I believe that she hates me," cried Percy.

"On the contrary, she told me to say that your friendship she could value, if you would not hint so strongly at your affection."

"Did she say that?"

"Yes; and, as affection will follow friendship, if you don't overdo it, Percy, bide your time," remarked Valentine.

"And lose her!"

"She will never marry—she has sworn it,

she says ; but Helena Barclay is young, and amiable, and generous, and naturally affectionate, and every day is a step forward from past misery."

"She has been wonderfully communicative, considering how much she dislikes you," said Percy doubtingly again, and Valentine started as at an ungenerous sarcasm levelled at him when it was least expected ; "but it is strange that with all this you think that in time Helena will learn to love me."

Valentine paused before he replied. He had thought so yesterday ; he was far from assured of it now, despite his distrust of women's resolutions, and his belief that Helena Barclay scarcely knew her own mind in the transition state which had come to her. He felt a sudden repugnance to continue the subject, to consider still further the wounded feelings of his companion, to give him one more hope which might be after all a bitter fallacy. He was not quite certain even that Percy was good enough for Helena Barclay, or that Helena would be a wife fitting for a nature as weak as his own—a woman's nature rather than a man's—and he was silent.

“Ah, you do not answer !” cried Percy.

“I am not Mrs. Barclay’s father-confessor,” said Val, thus adjured; “I am not in her secrets. What is at the bottom of her heart I know not any more than you do; she is to me, as to you, inscrutable.”

“What would you do in my place?”

“I would never give her up with my life,” said Val, quickly, “whilst the ghost of a chance was open for me to win her.”

“Neither will I then !” cried Percy, enthusiastically.

They reached the station, and went over Waterloo Bridge better friends than when they had started on their journey. At the front entrance to the Temple, Percy bade Valentine good night, and the barrister did not press his friend to accompany him to his chambers. The hour was late, and both were tired, and one man was beset with a strange yearning to be alone and to think in the quietude of his rooms of all that had passed before another day should bring its own distraction.

There was a vague talk of Val’s running down to Hernley presently, some love and compliments sent by the faithful messenger *en route*

homewards to-morrow, and then good-bye, and the Temple gate shut between them.

Val Merrick thought of all that he had said, of all that had happened—even to reveal the truth, of what a jealous young fool that Percy was—as he walked to his chambers. Long after he was in his room he brooded on it still, with his hand clutching his chin, and his clear grey eyes glaring at his unopened books where lay no charm in the law's mysteries that night to lure him to the work he had always loved and was marked out to prosper in.

He was a man with immense faith in himself—with a gigantic amount of confidence in his own honour, and in the strength which lay in the mighty power of his word—and he thought how puny-minded a mortal Percy Andison was, a man who went half way to meet troubles, as though he loved them for companions on the road. Still, though he knew it not—though he would not own it—there was one thought which he had not faced ; nay, from which he had turned away already !

CHAPTER XVII.

FACING THE TRUTH.

ARE there not periods in the career of most men when reflection is irksome, and it seems best to believe in friend Chance? Men who have faith in the nobility of their own conduct will no more stop to consider every petty reason that actuates them, or what the world will say of their motives, than the fool will who shuts his eyes and rushes on in despair, recking not of the huge wall of consequences against which he will smash himself presently.

Valentine Merrick went on, without reflecting whether he was wise or foolish in the course which he had adopted. He had immense faith in himself, as has been intimated; he thought that his was a character which should be above suspicion of his fellow-men; but, if it so pleased

them to distrust him, let them! He knew the measure of his own honour, his love of truth and honesty and purity, and he despised meanness and deceit with a heartiness that was sure warranty of his own high principles.

Such a man as he was not likely to go far wrong, it will be thought; but then such a man, secretly conscious of his strength, and superlatively indifferent to other folk's opinion, might be capable of very grave mistakes. To the wisest of us the pitfall opens at times, and to the self-complacent, the self-righteous, dawns the day of a terrible humiliation.

Valentine Merrick went more frequently to Richmond. Percy Andison had suspected him, and Florence had spoken so timidly of her fears of Helena Barclay that he had hidden away from an imaginary danger as a poltroon might have done. He had taught Helena to become afraid of him, even to miscontrue his actions, and he had brought grief to the heart of his mother. Why should he do that any longer? Why should he go on as if he distrusted himself—he, a man of great faith? His actions were clear enough, his future was mapped out; he was not a weak man, and he deserved to be

trusted. Hence, though he did not run down to Richmond at every opportunity, he did not studiously avoid his home at the bidding of a nervous girl who knew nothing of life, and but little of him.

He was not going to fall in love with Helena Barclay—he who had always objected to widows, young and old, especially the old—he who had been solemnly engaged to be married for the last twelve months. But he was not going to keep away from his mother, and to fret her heart any longer by his neglect of her—just as if he were afraid of Helena Barclay falling in love with him! The whole thing was ridiculous and unreasonable; and he had acted foolishly in considering it for a moment. He would be easy and natural, and do as he pleased. He was old enough to be his own master. Did they not say in the law courts that he had an older, shrewder, wiser head upon his shoulders than had any man of his age in the crowded ranks of his glorious profession; and was he to act like a woman, or to have his actions regulated by the dictates of a woman's caprice, a woman's groundless jealousy?

He went more often to Richmond—there was

no disguise about it. He had the candour, in one of his letters to Florence, to tell her that his mother was dull without him, and that he went, like a dutiful son, to see her now and then in consequence. He sent his mother's and Helena's love to her ; he was glad when Floy—like a sensible girl as she was, Heaven bless her!—wrote back an affectionate epistle, commenting not by a word on his movements, and giving her love in return to Helena and Mrs. Merrick.

How much better this living in the clear, bright atmosphere of fair dealings than dodging about in the fog of a hundred fancies ! How infinitely more satisfactory to conquer a doubt than to fly from a danger that was purely imaginary ! How intensely pleasant to know that Helena Barclay had learned to live down her fear of him, and to be assured that her face grew brighter and more radiant when he surprised her and his mother by an unlooked-for visit !

He became fond of these surprises, of taking them unawares, of extemporising little drives into the country with them, and little boating excursions upon the water—of bringing them both to London in the Opera season, which had begun, and where his mother could show off her

diamonds without a general shout of surprise at their value and lustre, and where Helena looked so beautiful that the persistent staring of the dandies through their lorgnettes made Valentine more savage than he ever owned.

They seemed like brother and sister at last, this couple who had distrusted each other so intensely and bitterly in the ever-memorable days of their first acquaintance. Helena had had but few friends in her life, and it was a grand achievement to win this man's esteem, to know that he respected her, and believed in her—to get over her horror of him, even almost the remembrance of that horror which his searching eyes had once created. Each after his or her fashion thought that there could be no mistake about this friendship, that the line of demarcation was too clearly and deeply drawn between them, and that neither would have stepped over it, or wished to step across it, to a deeper feeling, for the world.

Thus the time slipped away from Spring into the warm arms of Summer, and Valentine was still talking of going to Hernley, but still putting off the day of his journey, alleging for excuse the height of the season, the pressure of his

business, and believing in it all, as he looked forward, always looked forward, to his holidays with Floy.

The Andisons did not come to town ; for two seasons they had kept away from London, once from choice, the second time from gout in the feet of Lady Andison, a rare and unlooked-for complaint in the feminine portion of the house, and that was especially annoying to the Baronet's better half. It was always "presently" that they would be in town ; it was always "presently" that Val Merrick was going down to Hernley.

It was close upon the end of July when a change came o'er the spirit of the barrister's dream—when the thought and the honour and the courage of the man awoke at once, and there was no longer any shutting his eyes to the truth. He had been very weak at the moment that he was rejoicing in his strength ; thank Heaven no one guessed at his folly, or his miserable madness, save himself.

Still he went to Richmond ! He went in defiance of his own weakness, and to live down all the discontent that was in him at his helplessness to bring about Helena Barclay's happiness ;

and for the first time in his life he became conscious of what an utter failure he was. But he was courageous in his new misery, and he thanked Heaven again that it would be never again in man or woman's prescience to read his heart as he now read it for himself.

He was thanking Heaven for this one night, after the Opera—that Opera which Helena loved so much—and after his mother and Helena had bidden him good night. He had been left to go to his own room when the humour suited him, and his cigar had been smoked ; but his mother came back softly to his side. It was half an hour since she had kissed her son, but she was dressed as he had seen her last, with the Opera cloak still over her stiff black silk, and the diamond drops that Helena had given her glittering in her ears. His cigar had gone out, and he was sitting with his hands upon his knees, staring at the gold shavings in the steel grate, when the mother entered noiselessly and laid her hands upon his broad strong shoulders.

“Valentine,” she said in a low voice—a gentle mother's voice, which did not startle him.

He looked up at her as though he had al-

most expected that she would return that night.

"Ah, mother, you are back again then!" he said, with a faint smile.

"Yes, I thought that I would return for a little talk with you," she said, more softly still, almost timidly, it might be, in the beginning of a conversation upon which for days she had set her mind.

"You are very good to take pity on my loneliness," was the reply; "will you not sit down?"

His mother took the chair which was close to his side, which seemed as if it had been waiting for her, and looked very sadly and in very motherly fashion at him.

"Don't let me stop your smoking, Val; I got used to cigar smoke in your dear father's time," she said.

"It is out," he answered, opening his fingers and letting the cigar drop into the burnished steel ash-pan below him; "I have thought it out."

There was a pause. His manner scarcely invited the confidence which the mother had come thither to win; but Mrs. Merrick was not

to be daunted. Much of the son's natural courage—or should it be called moral courage?—Valentine Merrick had inherited from this lady.

“I have been a long while making up my mind to tell you what is rendering me unhappy, Val,” she commenced.

“Unhappy again!” he said, ironically.

“This time because you are unhappy,” she continued, earnestly; “because I feel that I have unconsciously helped towards it by my own want of forethought.”

“In no one instance of my life, mother, have you in any way given me a moment's unhappiness, let me assure you.”

“But you are unhappy?” Mrs. Merrick persisted.

“No.”

“No!” she repeated after him. “Can you say that, Val? Is it possible to disguise from me that of late days you have altered very much?”

“Ay!—that may be true,” responded the casuist; “I have altered, as the world alters and the seasons change. Man or woman is never twice alike. But I do not own to un-

happiness—why should I, when every day adds to a fame of which I am proud.”

“Val,” said his mother, undeceived by his energetic protest, “don’t you know what I am going to say?”

He was silent. His hands clutched his knees more closely, his clear grey eyes regarded the fire-grate more intently, there came a depth of shadow to the furrow on his massive forehead, and he did not answer her.

“You know what I am going to say—you do, Val?” she said, in earnest entreaty again.

“Well,” he added, thus appealed to for the second time—“perhaps I do.”

“And you will let me speak in all sincerity—as a mother fearing danger to you and your honour has a right to speak to you in this emergency?” she urged. “You and I, Val, are not likely to quarrel.”

“No,” he answered, moodily; “but——”

“But only a few words and a few honest answers, Val,” she said, entreatingly. “May I, dear? It will be so much better for all of us, you know.”

“Heaven knows, you mean,” was the deep response. “Ask me what you will, and rest

assured of the honesty of my replies."

"You are offended—you pick out my words and satirise them."

"No—no ; but remember," he said, looking at her gravely for the first time, "that I was never dishonest."

"I thank Heaven for that now."

"Amen !" said her son.

"Well, then," resting her hand, still trembling, upon his shoulder, "you are in love with Helena—my poor Helena?"

"Yes," came the mournful answer back, and without a moment's hesitation.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MOTHER AND SON.

IT was a plain unvarnished confession which Valentine had made to his mother in that monosyllabic reply with which our last chapter closed, and though knowing her son well, she was hardly prepared for it.

She drew a deep breath almost of surprise, so suddenly had the truth appeared to face her, so quickly had vanished the fugitive hopes that he might deny her charge, or laugh at it. But there had risen no denial to his lips, and it was not a laughing face at which the mother gazed.

“I am very, very sorry, Val,” said Mrs. Merrick in a trembling voice. “How has it come about? Why didn’t you tell me—why didn’t you have more courage to evade this?”

"There is no occasion to answer, surely," he said restlessly ; "you do not want a long story from me, and I have not the inclination to give it you, even if it were in my power to explain how step by step I approached her, loved her as, God's my judge, I shall never love another woman!"

"And—and poor Floy?" asked the mother almost breathlessly.

"Ah, poor Floy! If she only knew," he groaned forth bitterly.

"Yon don't love her, too?" was the simple question.

"I never loved her in my life," Valentine replied sternly.

"Oh, Val!" exclaimed the mother.

"I should have hardly known it if I had not met Helena," said Valentine.

"I proposed because Floy was a lady, young, pretty, rich, and liked me, just as hundreds of men propose in my set, thinking how well they play their cards, and live happily—ay, very happily—afterwards. I proposed," he said scornfully, "because it was a proper thing to do. Everybody wished it, I objected not, and the mother prompted me."

"Oh! my dear, I thought it was for the best; I was sure that it was for your good—I am so sure even now," cried Mrs. Merrick.

"I will not dispute your opinion, but I will not share it with you."

"What is to be done?" asked the mother, anxiously.

It was this which she had stolen downstairs to learn for herself. What was to be done?—how was the position to be mastered? From this new complication who was to suffer most?

"There is nothing to be done," said Valentine, wearily; "I have gone on like a fool, and like a fool I must bear it."

"Florence——"

"Florence Andison will never know me to be a different man from what I have been. In cold blood I asked her to be my wife," said Val, "in cold blood I will marry her rather than break her heart. Twelve months ago I pledged myself to her—before the year is out I shall be her husband."

"And make her one of the best husbands in the world," said his mother, cheerfully.

"And make her one of the best husbands in the world," he echoed back.

“You will make her a good husband because she loves you,” murmured Mrs. Merrick; “and you are bound in honour to her. All this is a passing fancy, which you are strong enough to conquer.”

“Yes,” said he, moodily.

He assented to all that his mother said, as though he saved discussion thereby.

“And you will not see Helena quite so often?” Mrs. Merrick suggested.

“Why?” was his sharp rejoinder, and there was a look of opposition on his face which suggested that all was not plain sailing yet.

“You would not add Helena’s misery to this complication?”

“Is there anything to fear?”

“No,” replied his mother; “I hope not. But what I have seen is scarcely likely to escape her.”

“She will not guess at my folly—I have been always on guard,” said Valentine.

“But Val, you will keep away now—for your own sake?”

“The harm has been done; no harm can befall her. I cannot hide like a coward,” said Val, firmly.

"No—no ; keep away for a time—go down to Hernley, or——"

"What is the alternative?" he asked, as his mother paused.

"Or Helena and I will travel and escape you," said Mrs. Merrick, as defiantly as her gentle nature would permit. "She has suffered enough, and I will not have her dragged into the misery which your weakness has created."

"Ay, she has suffered enough," muttered Val.

"You own that, and yet you would come as usual?"

"What will she think of my stopping away after all the persuasions and promises to come? There can be only one explanation to follow. She will guess at once the motive for my absence, and that she shall never do. I would rather that she hated me, that I made her hate me as she used."

"She had better hate than love," said his mother ; "but she will do neither if you will leave it to me—if you will only keep away for a little while, as is best and just, Val."

He crossed his arms upon his chest and looked away again. He had confessed, but it had vexed him to utter that confession, for

all the plain speaking which had followed it.

His mother had surprised him by her clear-sightedness; he had considered that the truth had lain far away from the comprehension of anyone save himself, and his heart was restive beneath the discovery. He had considered himself a consummate actor, and yet he had played his part so sorrily that this simple-minded woman had stripped his flimsy rags from the truth which he would have hidden from human knowledge—which he had only whispered to himself of late days.

Strangely vacillating that night was the man who had been always strong and self-reliant and hard to move from a set purpose, for, as the tears welled to his mother's eyes and she made a half-despairing gesture with her hands, he turned to her again.

"I will keep away!"

"God bless you, boy; I knew that you would," she said, bending over him and kissing him.

"Not for my own sake, but to spare her and you," he answered; "and so please make the best story that you can for me. I will go abroad soon—there is an opportunity."

"I wish that you would go down to Hernley," said his mother with a sigh.

"I can't yet," he answered, "it would be rank hypocrisy, and you don't know—oh, mother, you can never guess how much I love that woman upstairs. No one will ever know it," he added, with a set expression on his lips that checked all outburst and kept him very grave from that time.

He would not speak of her again; he shook his head in protest when his mother would have resumed the subject; and at a faint effort to soothe him, to talk to him, he thought indignantly, as she might have talked to Percy Andison, he rose from his chair to elude her.

"I am tired," he said, and Mrs. Merrick took the hint, stole from the drawing-room, and closed the door after her.

She had struck a great blow at a heavy cost to herself, and she had been successful; she had nipped a folly, a great mistake, in the bud by her prompt action, but she went slowly, almost regretfully, to her room, where she sobbed away half the night, and wondered what Val was doing downstairs, and was half tempted to rejoin him, till she remembered the rigid face

and the compressed lips which she had witnessed last.

Valentine Merrick was only standing on the hearthrug as his mother had left him, with his hands clasped behind him. There was much to think of, and he thought it out as he believed to the end. He thanked Heaven again for the strength with which it had endowed him; for the power to bear all this, and be the same man—he was sure that he should be the same man to a whole legion of his acquaintances—and in the midst of his first temptation there came never a thought of breaking his word and throwing over little Floy. He had foolishly plodded on to his own discomfiture; he had given way; he had learned to love Helena Barclay, and to guess at what a light fancy his had been for Florence Andison; but he had hurt no one but himself, and he could see the rosy vision of his one romance die away in the neutral tints of the life beyond, and never shed one tear over his irreparable loss.

When it was daylight, and daylight came somewhat early still, he let himself out of the house, buttoned his light coat to the chin over his full dress suit, thrust his hands into his side

pockets, and marched away in his patent leathers towards London, with the same steady outlook towards a future which had no power to scare him.

CHAPTER XIX.

MASTER OF HIMSELF.

GOOD Mrs. Merrick, like a prudent woman, seeing much trouble ahead, had very cleverly taken time by the forelock, and surprised her son and heir by her perspicacity. She had saved Helena from a false position ; she had checked Valentine's passion before any harm had been done, and she had stood as a good friend to little Floy Andison, when Floy had not a friend in London to fight her battles.

But Val was "a mother's boy ;" and it was giving him up again now that he had confessed that to see Helena Barclay was to love her. He was going to keep away for good ; and unless the mother sought him out at the Temple, he would pass away from her completely. She should never know whether he was happy

or unhappy—whether he had mastered his passion or allowed his passion to master him, confident in Val's moral strength as she might be. She knew that it was better he should keep away, but it was a knowledge that grew more bitter as the days went on, and Valentine came not, and Helena was at first full of wonderment, and then, by degrees, of deep, grave thought, which found vent no longer in surmises.

Both women read the newspapers, and knew that he was in town fighting his client's battles, for they met with his name constantly, and read his speeches, when the press condescended to report them, which was not unfrequent, now that Val Merrick's name was in the foremost rank.

They came even to avoiding the name in an odd fashion, born of the constraint between them; and though they loved each other none the less, they were scarcely as happy as in the early days, when they had both reproached Val Merrick for neglecting his mother. Helena might have the old suspicion again that she was disliked by her friend's son, but she had been spared the consciousness of Val's weakness; and Mrs. Merrick would have been glad of that, if

there had been much sense of gladness at her heart just then. Hers, however, was a conscience that weighed heavily against her peace of mind. Good woman though she had striven to be all her life—an earnest Christian, a kind friend, and one who would always step out of her way to do a good action or defeat a bad one—she was hardly satisfied with herself in Val's case; and words that had escaped her son in his bitterness of spirit during that last interview vibrated in her memory.

It was she who had prompted Valentine to make love to Floy Andison, who had hinted pleasantly and cheerfully at her prospects, who had liked Floy and believed that she would make any man an estimable partner; who had seen nothing but good to come of this match; who had set her heart upon it, and who had heard of the engagement with much of motherly pride and love. She had even considered it a love-match, until her son had undeceived her, and then the thought came to her that she had contributed in her way to Val's unhappiness, and she took little comfort to herself from the consciousness that he had gone the way which she had directed, because at that time his own

inclination had led him on—otherwise the thunders of the gods would not have moved him one step.

Hence Mrs. Merrick was in trouble, although she believed that the trouble would grow less; that Valentine would get over his passion, and like Floy all the better for a passing distraction. It certainly was a passing distraction—of that she was convinced. Helena was a widow, young and beautiful, but still a widow! She loved her very much, and the depth of affection that Helena had shown for her had drawn them together—mother and daughter even; but she would have preferred Val's marrying Floy Andison. It was a better match in all respects, save in a monetary point of view—and Mrs. Merrick was a trifle ambitious, and fond of "old families" and good connections. It would be better for Val's position in the world, she thought, if that careless, blundering world, of which she knew so little, was aware that Val had married well; and she knew—Helena herself knew—that there would be always some one to whisper a word against the woman who had been tried at York for her life. It could never have been a satisfactory match,

and it was as well that Val kept away, and that Helena never guessed his secret. If the widow Barclay had only loved her poor boy in return what terrible complications might have followed, and how badly Val might have treated the Baronet's daughter.

It was in September that the news came to Richmond that Val Merrick was going abroad. The opportunity had come, the friends were ready, and the lawyers' warrens were once more emptying their inmates. London missed many of its faces, business was slack, and Pleasure beckoned those who had been hardly worked and had money to spend to the sea, or beyond it to the bright lands where one could take high holiday, and sink the desk and the counting-house fathoms deep away from them.

"Going abroad!" said Helena, very thoughtfully, when the news was communicated to her at the breakfast-table.

"Yes, for a holiday," said Mrs. Merrick with affected cheerfulness, as she folded her son's letter, and deposited it carefully in her pocket, "as young fellows hardly tasked should seek new cities, new lives, new ideas, now and then."

"When is he going?" asked Helena.

“To-morrow.”

“There was a long silence, and Helena, who had been watching Mrs. Merrick narrowly, said with almost a cold indifference—

“He will call and bid us good-bye, perhaps?”

“He may. Perhaps he may,” added Mrs. Merrick, doubtfully, “if he has time; but when one is going a long journey there is so much to say and prepare for.”

“Yes,” said Helena.

“And I should not be surprised if he were to start away in a hurry, after all!” Mrs. Merrick affirmed.

“Without coming to see us?” added Helena, so slowly and softly that it was as if she were whispering to herself the words that had escaped her; “yes, I should be hardly surprised at that myself.”

There was nothing more said, although Mrs. Merrick glanced as keenly for an instant at Helena, as Helena had heretofore glanced at her companion; but there was nothing to read, or rather it was beyond her power to read all that was expressed in that handsome face before her.

It had all passed over very well, thought Mrs.

Merrick; there had been no difficult questions to parry, and Helena had not been over curious, and over fussy at Val's seeming neglect of the mother. Helena Barclay had grown used to the position, and took matters with more philosophy than in the first days of her rescue from Weddercombe. It was astonishing how grave and equable a lady she had become of late.

After breakfast Mrs. Merrick put on her bonnet and thought that she would go into the town on a shopping excursion, and Helena did not offer to accompany her, for which she was intensely grateful, as she did not want Helena's company that morning. Helena knew this, and guessed the motive very accurately; she was a young woman who could read this old lady's heart as though it had been an open book, and the effort to deceive her had been of a very poor and transparent kind, betrayed by over-nervousness.

Mrs. Merrick went into the town certainly, but her "shopping" was of the briefest character, and was followed by a visit to the railway-station, a flitting away to London, and a cab from Waterloo Bridge to the chambers in the Temple, where her son was waiting to bid her

good-bye, kindly and tenderly, but with a reserve that would allow never again of any mention of one great mistake.

Helena Barclay had come to London also, but Mrs. Merrick knew nothing of it at this period, Helena having chosen another compartment of the train, and kept studiously in the background until the passengers had melted away, and the friend had been driven off from the arrival platform.

Helena had not watched Mrs. Merrick, and was beset by no wish to ascertain whether her suspicions were correct as to the object of the mother's journey to town. She had made up her mind to face Valentine in the Temple, let him think what he would of the boldness of her intrusion—that she had seen his mother at the station, that she had come up to Waterloo by the same train, were incidents of the journey at which she was not surprised, but which she had not sought in any way to track out. She did not wish to see Mrs. Merrick, or to be seen by her, but she was not acting the spy, and she lingered passively and patiently at the book-stall, and walked slowly over Waterloo Bridge towards the Strand, so that her friend might

have leisure to say good-bye to her son unmarred by interference.

There was plenty of time for her interview with Mr. Merrick ; she had only a little business to transact, a few words to say, an explanation perhaps, to make, and she was self-possessed and grave enough, as befitted that new manner which Mrs. Merrick had already observed and was pleased to witness. She would allow the friend half-an-hour or three-quarters to say good-bye to her son, and she sauntered along the Strand and strove hard to take an interest in the bookshops, the jewellers, and the staring photographs of flaunty actresses with which every stationer's shop was full.

It was three-quarters of an hour to the minute when Helena Barclay went under the archway in Fleet Street to the Temple, as though she knew the place by heart—which she did from a map that she had studied all the way to London. There was no occasion to inquire her way, a quick glance of her dark eyes at the murky addresses on the walls, a consciousness of proceeding straight to her destination, undismayed by turnings right and left and straight ahead, all told of a deep study of

locality, and brought her without much difficulty to the chambers where Valentine Merrick plotted out his lines of defence and attack, and wrote his wise opinions.

The house was dark and gloomy wherein he lived, she thought, and there was no sunshine in the hall beyond the open door, or on the broad stairs, or on the first-floor landing-place, where the door of his chambers was, with "Mr. V. Merrick" painted in black letters above it.

The sight of that name seemed to deprive her of a certain proportion of her courage, for she stopped on the landing-place, and it was five minutes afterwards before she had gathered sufficient nerve to knock.

She was grave enough when she had been shown into the outer room, where a pale young man with long hair informed her that Mr. Merrick had left with his mother. It was in a calm, business-like manner that she expressed her intention of waiting in the possibility of Mr. Merrick's return, and the clerk ushered her into the barrister's room, after several inquiries, and returned to his own papers.

Helena sat and studied the backs of the law

books, and tried to take an interest in a newspaper that was on the table, and then gave up and waited patiently, with her gloved hands on her lap, and her sad face looking downwards at the well-worn carpet—a fair picture in a strange setting. He would surely come back presently; he could not have any important case on his hands within twelve hours or so of his going abroad; he had walked or driven with his mother to the station, and a few more minutes would bring him home again.

She sat so still, and for so long a time there, that the clerk forgot her in his pursuit of business, and gave a jump of surprise when, entering the room some time afterwards, he re-discovered her.

“I beg pardon,” he said; “but I—I think that it is very uncertain when Mr. Merrick will return now.”

“He is sure to return at some time or other, I presume?”

“Yes, madam.”

“Then I will wait. I have come a long distance to see him.”

The clerk withdrew, and Helena waited till Val Merrick came back. How long it was she

never knew ; for she was a woman who could think deeply, and forget time and place in her meditations. But he entered the room at last, and in hot haste, and paused to take breath in his amazement at the fair apparition seated in his chambers. The clerk had said something about a lady waiting for him, but he had not thought of Helena Barclay, of all women in the world.

“You here !” he exclaimed. Then he went slowly towards her, as if by an impetuous step she might fade away ghost-like from his presence, and shook hands with her.

He was not looking well, Helena saw ; he had need of a holiday. Hard work and a busy season brimming over with much profit, had brought him ample means, but had rendered him paler than his wont. She could almost imagine that he had been ill since they had met last at Richmond.

“I am very glad to see you,” he burst forth, “but you should not have come !”

“Not in friendship—not otherwise than on urgent business, I grant,” said Helena, with an extraordinary degree of calmness, the result of her meditation on an interview to which she had

looked forward longer than he deemed, "but I heard this morning from your mother that you were going to leave England, and I wished to see you before you left."

Her calm demeanour brought calmness to himself, and he knew his part as well as she. Better! for she did not know all—never would know anything of the struggle and heart-pain it had been to keep away from her, to live himself as though she had never lived. It was an impossibility as well as a struggle—he had found out that also, but he became as calm as she, and placed a chair opposite to that from which she had risen, and to which she had sunk again, took her seat, and said,

"Well, Mrs. Barclay in what way can I be of service to you?"

"When you used to come to Richmond," she said, without a tremor in her voice, he noticed—and after all, what had she ever cared for his coming! "we spoke more than once of the mystery at which Jane Graves had hinted in her last message to Arthur and me. I wanted your advice, although, dreading a painful subject, I did not care for it too quickly. You remember?"

"I remember perfectly," he answered, with an easy grace.

Every word that she had said to him in those sweet-bitter days of his hidden love and strangely-blended happiness and misery, he had held to his memory closely. He had forgotten nothing—it was only yesterday when she had spoken last to him in the bright day of the romance that he had had, and which she would never guess at.

"At one time or another it mattered little to me, so that it was far off enough," she continued, "I wished you to study a note-book of my late husband's—a strange medley of business details, money calculations, and odd jottings of events—and let me know the impression which it gave you. I have been studying it lately for myself—on the pages which I have marked with pencil there is more than one allusion, I consider, to the papers which should have been found in that poor woman's box. There were documents in that box when Jane Graves died—in all probability a will written a few hours before his death, perhaps—leaving everything away from me."

"What makes you think that?" asked Valen-

tine, all eagerness, as he took a small, neatly-folded parcel from her hands, and began unfastening the string which secured the wrapper, until she checked him.

“Not now, please,” she said, quickly. “When you are abroad—when you return—when I am away from you all—not now.”

“When you are away from us all?” repeated Valentine Merrick, slowly.

“Yes, it is that upon which I would say a few words also,” said Helena, in the same measured tone of voice; “which I could not say anywhere else than here, the opportunity for seeing you not having been frequent of late. How long shall you be abroad?”

“Six weeks, at least.”

“In six weeks time, then, Mr. Merrick, you can visit your mother’s house without fear of meeting me.”

“He——”

The cry of Helena was on his lips—even the first letter of her name had escaped him involuntarily; but he had checked himself in time, and only an unmeaning exclamation had been the result.

“You cannot think of leaving one who has

become so greatly attached to you?" he said, with more composure. "There has been no quarrel between you?"

"No," said Helena, in reply.

"She knows nothing of this?"

"Not a word yet," answered Helena in the same tone, which he tried vainly to comprehend, to guess at its coldness or at its forced composure. "There will be time for your mother and me to understand each other in a few more days, to arrange everything, to be, God willing, still the best of friends, till one or another of us drifts away beyond this world. When you return——"

"Yes, you have said that already," he cried, interrupting her. "Spare me the pain of hearing it again. There will be, when I return, no fear of meeting you at my mother's house at Richmond?—you are quite determined upon that?"

"Quite," said Helena, rising.

He rose with her, and stood looking at her anxiously, marvelling still a great deal, but mastering again the sense of misery, of intense dissatisfaction within him, which her words, her manner had created.

"I will not ask the reason," said our hero. "I dare not go over the old ground of debate and stormy argument. I thought that we had outlived it—that we had become friends—that you would have believed in my word."

"I did believe it for a time," said Helena, sadly, and yet like a woman aggrieved in spite of herself, "I try to believe it now. I know that I should be the last woman to repine at any petty slight, or to conjure up any fancy grievance; but there is no surmounting the fact that we have hardly in our lives been friends, and that whilst I am at your mother's side you take occasion to desert her."

"It looks like it," he muttered; "it is the old charge—the old story."

"I did not wish to bring one atom of discomfort to her when I asked a worthy woman to take pity on me; and I will not," she added with a sudden flash of spirit, of the hidden fire of indignation at his neglect or contumely, showing itself at last through the mask of imperturbability that she had worn. "I am not a selfish woman, and I can go away now, assured of the wisdom of the step I take. I have got very strong."

"You are acting rashly," he said in the same low compressed tones which he had kept, as it were, in unison with hers.

"I am acting for the best."

"And on my return, how am I to communicate with you upon this weighty matter?" he asked, raising the packet from the table and letting it fall again.

"When—when I am settled, I will write to you," she said.

"I may rely upon you to do this," was his answer.

"Yes," she murmured, "or to your mother. It matters not which, I suppose."

"Not at all," he responded quietly ; "she can communicate with me."

Helena moved towards the door, and he reached out his hand and opened it. On the threshold of his room the strange pair faced each other again.

"You will let me wish you a pleasant holiday, Mr. Merrick, and better health," said she.

"Thank you ; but I am in excellent health, Mrs. Barclay.

"Your mother seemed to think that change of air and scene was necessary for you," said

Helena. "In your letter to her this morning you implied as much to her as that."

"Did my mother show you my letter?"

"No."

"I am going to Switzerland with the Andersons," said Val. "Did she not tell you?"

"No," said Helena, once more. "Is there any reason to keep it from me?"

"Hardly, I should think," he replied.

"Ah! yes, there was," said Helena, thoughtfully; "she might have thought that I should volunteer to accompany Florence—who is well, I trust?"

"She is very well."

"And in high spirits at her journey. Pray remember me to her, should she not come to Richmond to see me—give her my best love—my best wishes for a happy holiday. Good-bye, sir," she said, with a new humility replacing her past coldness; "don't think me a restless or discontented woman, because I have told you all the truth that is in my heart to-day."

"That we have hardly in our lives been friends?" he asked.

"That is near the truth, I think," she answered, sadly; "although we tried to be friends for

awhile."

"For awhile," he repeated.

She held her hand towards him, and he took it, and bowed low over it, but did not hazard another word. Thus they parted, and as he dropped like a stone man into his chair, he congratulated himself on having fought through his part with consummate success.

It had been a great triumph. He had kept his word to his mother, to himself, to Floy Andison; and Helena had not guessed how closely her feet had strayed to the edge of a storm which at any moment might have riven asunder all pretence, and miserable formality and shallow estimate of human nature, with its mighty strength for desolation. He had not known the extent of his own power of self-repression until then; but there was an awful despair upon him, rather than the victor's flush of conquest, as he sat there facing the truth.

He loved Helena Barclay, and Helena was going away for good. He had brought about her unhappiness with his, and it was beyond his power to help her, or to set his actions in a clearer light.

CHAPTER XX

A CLEAR EXPLANATION.

AS Helena Barclay passed from the house wherein were Val Merrick's chambers, friends from Hernley confronted her with a startling suddenness. She would have been glad to escape them, although friends had been scarce with her through life, despite her ingenuousness, despite her money! There was an instinct to lower her veil, and to turn in a contrary direction, in the hope that she had not been perceived, but they were close upon her, and one had already exclaimed "Helena!" in her surprise at the *rencontre*.

They were three friends making for the chambers of Val Merrick, who was not to rest in peace that day, or to have much time to him-

self to arrange for his holiday. Percy Andison had escorted his mother and sister through the mazes of the Temple, and landed them safely at the haven, when Helena Barclay stood before them like a phantom, and scared them almost as much.

“Helena!” exclaimed Floy Andison as the colour left her face, and the big violet eyes dilated with amazement.

“Mrs. Barclay!” exclaimed Lady Andison, looking right and left with bird-like alacrity; “not alone in such a place as this, surely?”

“I am quite alone,” said Helena.”

“But Mrs. Merrick——” began Percy.

“Is not with me.”

“Nor your maid—not even your maid?” exclaimed Lady Andison, with a faint little shriek of further astonishment.

“Not even my maid,” said Helena, very quietly. “I had business with Mr. Merrick; it was necessary that I should call upon him.”

Helena said this more by way of explanation to Floy Andison—as if she alone might be entitled to an explanation—than to the Baronet’s wife.

Floy did not answer. Her colour had not

returned ; there was a set expression in her face that had aged her wondrously, considering how young and fair she was.

Helena was surprised, even deeply pained ; but hers had been a life of self-repression, and she turned with easy grace to Percy and his mother, and was undaunted by their stolid countenances.

“Mr. Merrick did not say that he expected you this morning,” she said.

“Probably not, Mrs. Barclay,” answered Lady Andison.

“I heard that you were in town, however, and have been wondering whether you would call at Richmond and see Mrs. Merrick,” she continued, after a pause, “before you left for the Continent.”

“I intended to run over this evening,” said Percy, moodily, “if time would have permitted me,” he added, with a reserve.

“Mrs. Merrick would have been very pleased to see you,” answered Helena, with grave politeness. “Had you favoured her son with an earlier visit, you would have found her at his chambers. Good morning.”

They had not shaken hands at meeting with

each other, and there was no more friendliness exhibited at parting.

Helena Barclay seemed once more under a cloud, which had risen swiftly and suddenly, and submerged her. She could see that clearly for herself; but she felt intensely proud that day, and indisposed to offer an explanation. She had not acted wisely, she knew, and it was the first time that she had given one thought to the "proprieties." But hers had been business of importance, and she had wished to see Val Merrick before he went abroad, and to tell him that he would not find her in Richmond on the day of his return. What these three thought of her visiting a young barrister in his chambers she did not care; she had been always strangely indifferent to the opinions of those too ready to suspect her. If they could not trust her, she was sorry; but she was above all excuse when confronted by cold looks and doubtful glances.

She thought it singular that Percy Andison—the man of much confidence—should betray his astonishment at his first meeting with her; but he scarcely belonged to her world, and so what mattered it? Her world was beyond these Andisons and Merricks, and she was al-

ready on her way towards it, and wondering very sadly in her heart what it would be like.

The meeting in the Temple seemed to be even then a far-off incident, that hardly concerned her. If it were necessary, she left it to Val Merrick to explain ; and she passed on, and was a hundred yards away from them, when a light hand was laid upon her arm.

"I am coming a little way in your direction, Helena," said Florence in her ear. "I am afraid that I have offended you—that I have acted very badly to you ; and if I have, as I am sure I have now that I think of it, I—I am awfully sorry. You know that."

It was a hurried statement, made with quivering lips and changing colour ; it was like Floy Andison's impulsiveness and open-heartedness, and Helena Barclay lowered her flag, for she loved little Floy, and remembered all at once every past kindness which had been shown to her.

"I am glad that we are not going to part like this, Florence," said Helena, drawing the little hand within her arm, "that there are not to be any suspicions between you and me at least.

But do they admire your coming after me?—Is it proper?”

“I haven’t asked them, Helena.”

“You did not like my visiting your lover, Floy,” said Helena. “It was a shock; and suggested that the widow—the woman of the world!—might be fighting hard to steal him away from you. In the first moment of our meeting I stabbed you to the heart?”

“Yes, you did,” confessed Floy. “I couldn’t make out what you wanted there, it seemed so strange, and you are so different a woman from me.”

“Ah! thank God for that!” said Helena, earnestly, “as you should thank Him for your life’s brightness, and the glory of a future such as yours will be.”

Floy looked hard at her, and Helena laughed lightly.

“I don’t mean the glory of such a husband as you will have,” said Helena, “although you will be very happy with him.”

“But you don’t tell me——”

“Why I went to the Temple,” said Helena. “Well, because Mr. Merrick would not come to Richmond; because he never comes; because he

keeps away, and does not like me any more in his heart than when he thought me the wickedest of women ; because I had an important paper to place in his hands and ask his advice upon ; and because I am going to leave Richmond, and he and I are not likely to meet again. Is that sufficient motive for my womanly indiscretion ? Will it content Floy Andison ?”

“ Yes,” answered Floy.

“ I did not accompany Mrs. Merrick,” said Helena, “ because that dear faithful friend would have offered a hundred objections to my joining her, knowing of her son’s dislike to me.”

“ I don’t think that Val dislikes you, Helena—I am sure that he does not,” answered Florence.

“ He tells me that I am mistaken ; only to-day, Florence, he said that ; and he has tried very hard to be friendly, but he comes not to Richmond now, and I know that he avoids me.”

“ But——” began Florence eagerly, when Helena interrupted her.

“ Pray do not speak of this. What does it matter, Florence, either way, to him or to me ? I am going away !”

“Why?”

“Because it is better,” Helena answered, “and I am a dissatisfied woman whom nothing contents. The great burden of my life is removed—but am I any the happier? Sometimes I think that I am not.”

“Helena,” said Florence, in a very low voice, “will you forgive me if I tell you something?”

“Why should I not forgive you?” was the rejoinder.

“Oh, say you will, or I shall never have the courage to confess it,” urged Florence.

Helena looked wistfully into the troubled face of her companion, and was moved by the tears swimming in her eyes.

“There is nothing that I could not forgive Floy Andison,” she said.

“Then it has been all my fault,” Florence exclaimed.

“Your fault! What has been your fault?” Helena asked wonderingly.

“Val’s keeping away from you and his mother. I was jealous,” Floy said, blushing deeply and looking down; “I was afraid of your meeting too often, seeing each other day after day, be-

coming companions, friends, and I not by. He was terribly sorry for his past suspicions, and you had been unjustly suspected ; you were so beautiful, and I was so jealous and fearful, and so far away from him, that I asked him to keep from you."

"Oh, Florence!" cried Helena.

"Yes, it was very little," said Florence, plaintively ; "it was mean-spirited, but I could not help it, dear. I am afraid that I am a mean creature. I loved my Val so much, and your illness had affected him so strangely—even to my jealous fancies wholly altered him. I can only say again, Helena, that I was afraid of you, and that I am very, very sorry."

Helena walked on in thoughtful silence for a few minutes, and then said,

"When did you ask Valentine Merrick to keep away from me?"

Florence told her, and Helena became more thoughtful after the information had been imparted. It was strange news, and added to the enigma rather than helped to clear it, for Val had been more often to Richmond in the early days following his mother's birthday ; he had come day after day at last, as though he had

learned to respect her and to trust in her.

“That is not much to forgive,” she said, with a sudden and bright smile, “don’t they say somewhere, Floy, that there is no true love without jealousy?”

“I always considered that a very wise observation,” replied Floy, with solemnity.

“And even you,” Helena added, “thought it was not a wise step of mine forcing myself upon Mr. Merrick’s company. I wish that you had spoken out before, dear.”

“It was selfish and unkind to think so. I see that now.”

“No, Florence, you see nothing,” answered Helena, quickly; “you grope in the mist as I do—as perhaps he does—and there will be no light till I am gone. God bless you, Floy—good-bye!”

She dropped Floy’s hand from her arm, and hastened away, and Floy stood for awhile looking after her, and feeling that even with the explanation that had been given and received on both sides, the mist of which Helena Barclay had last spoken was thick about her still.

She thought of all that had been said between

her and Helena with every step back to the Temple, where Percy and her mother and Valentine Merrick were awaiting her.

CHAPTER XXI.

UNDER SUSPICION.

WHEN Lady Andison and her son were ushered into the barrister's chambers, they discovered the gentleman of whom they were in search deep in the study of a dog-eared manuscript volume, his elbows planted on the table and his hands supporting his chin, a school-boy habit which, in cases of a difficult character, had not yet wholly deserted him.

He looked up as they entered, and did not appear particularly delighted at the company with which he had been favoured. He closed his book somewhat reluctantly, and surveyed his visitors stolidly, and even weariedly, as a man might do tired with society.

Lady Andison's severe expression of countenance, and the deep set gloom of Percy's visage

did not strike him as peculiar; he was unconscious of them, he was in a world of his own, from which they had failed to arouse him completely; he was only aware that he had been intruded upon at a time when he would have preferred solitude—when solitude seemed imperative to the clear understanding of two lives.

“We have just met Mrs. Barclay,” said Lady Andison, with a little snap of acerbity by way of commencement. “We were coming to talk over to-morrow’s journey, and to tell you that Sir Charles writes that he will be in town this evening, and that he expects you to dine with us at the hotel, when we certainly were very much astonished to discover Mrs. Barclay in the Temple—very much astonished, indeed!”

Valentine’s sense of dreaminess departed, and his observant nature shone out of his eyes, as he regarded his probable mother-in-law with great intentness.

“Astonished at what?” he asked calmly.

“At a lady’s coming alone to your chambers, Valentine,” said Lady Andison, in severe reproof.

“Mrs. Barclay had business of importance to

transact," said Valentine, as gravely as Lady Andison, "and honoured me by asking my advice on a matter of moment."

"No business can excuse a lady's visit to a single gentleman's apartment, in my opinion," said Lady Andison. "She should have written—she should have been attended by a companion. She has acted in a highly indiscreet manner, to say the least of it."

"She will not come again," said Valentine, almost mournfully.

"Besides, I think——" Lady Andison recommenced, when Valentine held up his hand with a suddenness that made her pause—there was so imperative an injunction to stop implied by his quick action.

"You will excuse me, Lady Andison, but I can listen to no more of this," he said, sternly. "Helena Barclay is a dear friend of my mother's—a dear friend of mine—an artless and a gentle lady, whom every honourable mind would spare from suspicion, in consideration for her past misfortunes; and I will no more allow a word to be said against her in my presence than I would allow an imputation to be cast upon my own honour, and in my own house."

“Good gracious!” ejaculated Lady Andison, in dismay.

“I am sorry to speak thus decisively to you—Floy’s mother,” Valentine said, less sternly. “I should be still more sorry to hear from your lips another word in disparagement of the motives which led a good woman here, and hence you will refrain from further comment.”

“Very well, Mr. Merrick—oh, very well!” said Lady Andison, tossing her head with manifest indignation. “If you look at it in that high light, and fire up in that absurd manner—you will allow me to say absurd—merely because I venture to express astonishment at Mrs. Barclay’s eccentric manner of transacting business, I will be as silent as you please. But—”

“Where is Florence, Percy?” asked Valentine, turning impatiently to her son.

Val was in a strangely irritable mood himself; he could scarcely account for it. For Lady Andison, a cross-grained, peevish, suspicious, proud woman, he had never had a very high esteem, and he felt that he could brook no further words from her. There was even a secret longing to quarrel with her, and he quelled it by an effort, and with a strong

grip held down the storm that was gathering in his heart. He knew that it would be sober policy to talk to Percy, whose own sullen mood aggravated him as much as the mother's aspersions on Helena Barclay had done.

"Florence has gone a little way with Mrs. Barclay," answered Percy, thus appealed to.

"I hope that she will not ; but she is a sensible girl, and will say not a word to wound the feelings of her friend," said Valentine. "Will you sit down and wait for her? I am glad that Sir Charles will be in town to-night ; we shall not have him on our minds before we start to-morrow. Waiting for people to turn up at the last moment, and at all kinds of odd corners, is a bit of a bore. I think we shall have fair weather to begin with. I look forward to much sunshine altogether."

He ran on glibly after his first start. He had spoken out at an early stage of the interview ; he had contrived to change the topic of conversation ; he did not wish it to appear that in any way he had taken offence at Lady Andison's outspokenness, and although he was none the less in a bad temper, he was too well able to disguise his chagrin to show that anything that

had been said lingered in his mind to his prejudice or to that of his companion. He would consider that there had been a slight misunderstanding which everybody had got over to everybody's satisfaction, although he was none the less perfectly assured that Lady Andison was one of the most hateful women in the world.

Lady Andison, however, had not "got over" Valentine's reproof. She was a woman who had brooded a great deal through life upon the slights and indignities that had been proffered her, and she was grave and freezing for the remainder of her morning call. She had never been "caught up" so in the whole course of her life, and to be lectured by a young whipper-snapper of a barrister—she, Lady Andison, of Hernley—was still a matter for solemn wonderment. If he behaved thus unceremoniously at this early stage, what could she expect from him after he had married her daughter, and pocketed her daughter's portion? To think that she could not open her lips without having him jump down her throat in this manner!

When Florence found her way into the room,

her shrewd perceptions suggested what had occurred—for she understood the dispositions of those three tolerably well. She came in full of high spirits—all had been satisfactorily explained by Helena Barclay—and she had wholly forgotten what a terrible spasm of jealousy had seized her only a little while ago. She saw that her mother was in one of her bad moods, and that Percy was as glum as she had left him, and she dashed into conversation, and talked of dear Helena, and the pleasure that it had been to meet her again, with great volubility, and with an evident desire to impress her listeners with the conviction that she at least had not an atom of doubt in her whole disposition.

Valentine brightened up at this, for he would not have had Floy suspect him or Helena Barclay for the world, and that she was happy and had faith in him was sufficient. His had been a life of self-deception and self-restraint of late days; but if he could deceive Floy Andison to the end, if she would never learn an atom's worth of his past folly—surely it all belonged to the past?—he would make her very happy, and he would strive to be grateful for that

affection which he had unworthily won. This was the aim and object of his life, and he left it to time, having great faith in time and himself, poor weakling that he was, after all.

Nevertheless, he was glad when they talked of going—it was an immense relief. The prattle of his lady-love confused him, and made his head ache, and Lady Andison would be no more gracious till she had conferred with Floy, and awakened slowly to the conviction of how silly and unjust she had been. Percy would recover suddenly, after his usual way, and have another violent fit of friendship, to make amends for his present distrust—he did not mind Percy in the least.

“You will come to the hotel at six, Val?” said Floy. “Mamma has told you that Sir Charles will be there to dine with us. Percy is going to the Great Northern to meet papa in the afternoon. Perhaps you will accompany Percy?” she added, wistfully.

“I shall not be able to see your father to-night, Floy, I fear,” said Valentine, interrupting her. “I have to clear up every scrap of business before I turn my back upon England, and to-night must be a long study and a hard

fight with stubborn papers, that perplex me, and which I must master."

He did not tell her that he had resolved to read through and to study hard the old notebook of Michael Barclay, which had already fascinated him, and was the clue to Helena's life and truth—which shadowed forth, perhaps, a new disaster to one whom he would shield, if he could, from every breath of calamity. He felt that Helena stood alone in the world, and though she doubted him—disliked him—he must be for ever her secret trusty friend.

"I thought all the business was worked off, Val," said Florence.

"Not yet."

"But to-morrow——"

"To-morrow will see me free—without a case on my mind."

"What a holiday it will be, Val!" cried Floy, clapping her hands. "What a deal I shall see of you at last!"

"Florence, don't go on in that mad way!" said her mother, who was disposed to think that her daughter had seen far too much of the barrister already.

"And so, with that hope, Val," said Florence,

holding out her hands to him, "I shall excuse your attendance this evening, and leave you to your glorious Liberty and your dreadful Law. You would come if you could, I know."

But he did not know that, though he shook her hands in his, and thought what a hypocrite he was. Every time he saw Floy Andison he felt more keenly the depth of his duplicity, though he clung still to Time, that one hope in the future, wherein he would make amends for everything.

"Percy, are you ready?" asked Lady Andison.

"I shall stay here a little longer with Mr. Merrick," was the answer.

"I'm sure Val does not want to be bothered by you, if he's busy," said Floy, very plainly.

"I shall detain him only a few minutes," said Percy, gravely.

"More business! Val, don't give that sleepy young man any advice, at any price," cried Floy, laughing. "He's not to be trusted; poor Helena has turned his head completely."

It was an unfortunate and ill-timed peroration, and was not commented on.

Florence and her mother departed from the

chambers of Val Merrick, who closed the door upon them politely, and then returned to Percy Andison.

CHAPTER XXII.

PERCY IS WEAK.

HAD Percy taken the trouble to examine closely the features of Val Merrick after the barrister had returned to the room, he might have hesitated in the course he had resolved to adopt. But he was a man with one idea, and it had oppressed him too long to teach him caution for himself, or respect for his friend.

"I am sorry to say, Percy, that I can only spare you ten minutes," said our hero, as he resumed his seat and drew the volume which he had been studying towards him.

"Ten minutes are more than enough," said Percy, abruptly.

Valentine affected not to be disturbed by young Andison's brusque response, although

there was less cause for self-restraint now that the ladies had quitted them, and he answered,

“Under the circumstances, I am glad to hear it.”

Percy rose from his chair and leaned across the table with a sudden and almost mad fierceness in his face, and said,

“Why did Helena Barclay meet you here to-day?”

“I think that I have explained sufficiently,” was Val’s cool answer.

“It is not sufficient explanation for me,” Percy retorted.

“By what right do you demand more, or consider that I am answerable for my actions to you?” said Valentine.

“I have been deceived too long, and, by Heaven, I will stand no more of it!” Percy continued, with increasing excitement. “You two love each other, and keep back the truth from me.”

“You rave, Percy,” answered Valentine; “you, the man all confidence and faith in Helena Barclay, are now the first to do her an injustice. She came here—but no,” he added quickly, “she is above my explanation. Percy Andison,

I will not have her name and mine mentioned together. I have no excuses to offer; I said long ago that I would never attempt to conciliate you again. I have done with apologies for ever."

"You will not tell me why she visited you this morning?"

"Ask your sister, who has heard Helena's story."

"You love her!" Percy reiterated.

Valentine shrugged his shoulders, though he thought how close this man in his jealousy had approached to the truth.

"You have fooled and misled me, and you cannot deny it," Percy continued. "You are playing a treacherous part towards my sister—you are acting dishonourably towards her and me."

"I have no answer for you," said Valentine coolly. "Say what you will—your madness is your excuse."

"Yes, I am mad," replied Percy, with bitter intensity; "the world's duplicity has robbed me of every atom of sober sense, and I drift onwards with not a human soul to save me."

The misery in his voice and at his heart

touched his listener, but Valentine would not re-approach the subject. Val's conscience was hardly clear; he had not done his best, but he would explain no further; he could explain no more without betraying his own weakness.

"Do you think, Val Merrick," Percy cried in his old fierce tones, "that I have been dreaming since we met last?—that I have let the world go by, and you and her along with it, having my doubts of both of you? I tell you that I have watched and set others to watch; that there is not an action of your lives which I have not seen or been informed of, and that there is much mystery about you which only a love for Helena Barclay can account for."

"Watched!" cried Valentine indignantly.

"You were always together till a few months ago; you have kept apart of late days as though you would deceive others as well as me; but she comes to this room now—she has been here to-day."

"For the first time and the last."

"I do not believe it."

"Yes, you are very mad," said Valentine, scornfully; "and hence I cannot resent your affronts as I would a saner man's. If you

have acted the spy, I am sorry—you have only to complete your task by telling Floy of your suspicions, and thus render me eternally your debtor.”

“I will not break her heart, if I can help it. I have been the victim of many awful doubts,” he said moodily, “and I have fought hard to believe in you, but to-day adds the missing link to a chain of evidence that I have forged. How to act from to-day, I don’t know. God help me, I can’t see my way, and you will not tell me all the truth.”

Yes, the man was very weak, thought Valentine, as he regarded him curiously. Love had had a bad effect upon him—surely there was something like enchantment in Helena Barclay’s beauty, for he, too, had suffered of late days, though he had not given way in this fashion.

“I have told you the truth of Helena Barclay’s dislike and fear of me,” said Val, “and I cannot repeat her story in extenuation of my motives. If you and your spies have watched me, you have formed your own estimate of my character, Percy, and I care not what it may be, but—don’t watch me again, now that I am on my guard, or harm may come of it.”

"Will you tell me why you did not meet her at your mother's house on this matter of business which she considered of importance?" he asked suspiciously again.

"I will not affront her so much as to offer an apology for the honour she has done me by her visit," cried Valentine; "I will answer no questions, and I will take it as a favour if you leave me."

"Will you promise not to see her again?"

"No," said Valentine, more angrily.

"Then beware of any attempt to deceive me, for I shall resent it," said Percy. "You deny all love for her," he added, and without heeding Valentine's gesture of dissent which he could not afford, though he felt it might betray him, "and I take your denial as an answer. We are enemies to the death, if I have cause to feel myself your dupe."

"You must have been reading a sensation novel lately, Percy, to talk in that strain," said Valentine, laughing at his friend's last threat.

"I warn you," said Percy, frowning.

"Very good—thank you," answered Val; "and now allow me to warn you that, if you interfere with my work any longer, I shall not

be able to join your father's party to-morrow. You accompany us?"

"Yes," was the sullen answer.

"What a charming holiday it will be," said the barrister, opening the volume, from the perusal of which he had been for so long a time interrupted. "My compliments to the ladies, and I shall be with you early at the hotel to-morrow."

Percy did not answer. The tone of light banter which Val Merrick had finally adopted, as if by way of foil to his own heroics, was gall and wormwood to a cup overflowing with bitterness already. He had required—yearned for—Val's old tones of friendly solace and support, Val's indignant protest against his suspicions, even his bold assertion once more that he did not love Helena Barclay. Val had not said this; he had appeared confused and amazed and indignant by turns, that was all.

He went from Val's chambers without another word, and the stronger mind that he had left there turned itself to the new mystery lurking in old Michael Barclay's note-book.

"Is there a storm approaching, and will poor

little Floy suffer with the rest of us?" Val soliloquised half an hour afterwards, as he rested the book for a few minutes on his knees; "or is the storm over, and is this the clearing-up shower? Helena and I will never meet again, so Percy's jealousy comes late in the day, fortunately for all of us; and these big dark clouds," he added, spreading forth his arms as though he thrust them back by the movement, "come not between me and those I have deceived; they roll back for ever—they sink down by their own dull dead weight—they are gone! He said that I had acted dishonourably—if he thinks so, will he not tell Floy, and end it all, and set me free? Free!" he added, with a sudden indrawing of his breath, as if there was happiness in the thought of breaking from his pledge, of saving himself—perhaps Floy.

For what a terrible suspense it all was—and how he, even in that state of wisdom in which people believed who entrusted human lives and worldly fortunes to his pleading, could not tell which was best, what was right in a simple love case, of which he was hero and victim in one! He would do his best if he could; he had acted foolishly, and was content to sink self for his

word's sake—but was he acting rightly in thinking only of Floy's happiness and his pledge to her? Would she be happy for a single instant after she was assured that he had never loved her—and that he had loved another woman? Was that secret to be hidden all his life, with Percy Andison so mad and so outspoken?

It was a problem that he had not solved yet—and its intricacies took him from the wild story in his hands, until he curbed his wandering fancies, and set himself to his work.

He forgot his own troubles in the volume once more—for there were strange notes of a strange mind dotted amidst much worldly calculation, and he could see that the old man had loved and then hated his young wife, and was of a plotting, despicable, selfish character, that exulted in human misery, and his own superiority to it. A cunning old man, with great powers to deceive and ensnare—a man who must have been worth studying in the depths of his cruelty and stubbornness.

He read on all that day; he re-read as if something more were to be pieced out from these dead mutterings of a soul terribly full of

discontent; and the clerk ventured to tell him at last that it was late, and that Mr. Merrick had forgotten his dinner.

"You can go, Etheridge," he said, "I shall be here for some time yet."

"And to-morrow, Mr. Merrick?"

"To-morrow I shall look you up for a few minutes before I start for the Continent."

"Good evening, sir."

"Good evening."

Mr. Etheridge, a young man of promise, in whom Valentine Merrick took an interest, remembered those were the last words of his principal, and that the last he saw of him was his figure standing by the window, striving still to read from the old note-book by the remnant of the twilight that was left in the Temple.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE WHOLE TRUTH.

HELENA BARCLAY, careless in the matter of railway time-tables, missed her train by a few minutes, and lost much time in waiting for the next. It was late in the afternoon when she reached Richmond, and found Mrs. Merrick nervous and anxious concerning her absence from home.

"My dear, where have you been, and what has kept you so long away?" exclaimed Mrs. Merrick, upon her companion's entrance, pale and weary-looking, as though she had travelled a hundred miles that day.

"Can't you guess?" was the rejoinder, as Helena sat down, and smiled faintly at her questioner.

"You haven't been—surely you haven't

been——” and then the good lady paused in dismay, and waited for Helena to explain matters more fully.

Helena took her own time, she was in no hurry to enter into the particulars of the journey to town, and the object of her mission; she seemed even to wait for Mrs. Merrick's further questioning, but Val's mother continued silent, as if another word might betray the secret which she had promised her son to keep, and which her own vigilance had detected months ago.

Mrs. Merrick was a thoughtful and observant woman in her way, and for a long while had she lain in wait, as it were, for a closer insight into Helena Barclay's heart, flattering herself that she had probed it to the depths, and that there was simply love for herself at the bottom of it, and no new sorrows. It was only on that day, and with Helena sitting before her, white and languid, and with her small hands clasped together in her lap, that the thought came to the matron that this young nature, affectionate and impulsive as it was, might have baffled her powers of comprehension.

They were both silent over their early tea,

which the servant brought in and carried away again, wondering at the hush in the house. Mrs. Merrick understood the art of waiting patiently, and, as she considered herself entitled to an answer to her last question, without hazarding a guess as to the reason for Helena's movements, she remained passive until her companion thought a fitting opportunity had arrived for a response.

She waited so long, and Helena drifted meanwhile into so deep a current of thought, that, although one of the best and most patient of old ladies, she felt disposed at last to consider herself aggrieved. She had already guessed that Helena had been to the Temple, and was reluctant to tell her all that Val had said in his surprise—and she was sure it must have been a great surprise—at receiving her as a visitor.

Helena had gone in all good faith, in all innocence of the one great secret of Val's life, but Mrs. Merrick was curious to know the result. The dissatisfaction which she felt at Helena's silence must have betrayed itself upon her face, for Helena leaned forward suddenly, and peered anxiously into it.

Though the warm days of that early Autumn had not completely vanished, there had been a chilliness of atmosphere that afternoon and evening, and hence a small fire had been lighted in the drawing-room grate. The twilight had stolen to the room as into Val's chambers at the Temple, where the barrister was reading by the window; and it was only by the flickering coal-flame that the two women could see each other. Helena had perhaps wished for this as for a fitting time when revelations might be made, and stern truths faced as she thought they would be then.

"You are offended with me?" she said suddenly and anxiously.

"Oh, no, my dear, I am not offended exactly," replied Mrs. Merrick, taken off her guard; "but you are strange to-day—and really your silence is incomprehensible."

"I thought that you might have guessed that I wanted time—a great deal of time—to think," said Helena, half sadly, half reproachfully.

"Well, Helena, have I attempted to disturb your meditations?"

"No," was the response, "you have been very forbearing."

There was another pause, as if Helena's freedom of utterance were still beset by obstacles almost insurmountable; then her voice rang out so clear, and low, and calm that Mrs. Merrick turned to her quickly.

"I have a great deal to tell you, mamma," she said; and though this was the old appellation given and received with much affection, the elder woman thrilled at it; "and the best way of telling you has perplexed me very much, for I am not clever, and the truth will distress the one friend that I have."

The one friend! Mrs. Merrick was touched by the appeal, but she was glad that Helena did not consider Valentine as her friend, that Valentine had not betrayed himself, if Helena and he had met that day.

"One true friend," answered Mrs. Merrick gently, "is as good as a hundred."

"Thank you," she replied, and then the white hand stole into that of the elder woman, and lay there trustfully.

It was very feverish in its soft clasp, thought Mrs. Merrick, and the pulse was beating rapidly despite the calmness of the voice. There was more to come than she had bargained for in the

matter of revelation, she was sure, and she was sorry.

“I have seen Valentine to-day,” Helena murmured.

“I was afraid that you had,” replied Mrs. Merrick.

“Why afraid?” interrogated Helena.

Mrs. Merrick hardly knew what response to make; the remark had escaped her, and it seemed hardly complimentary in the first moment of consideration. It implied fear of her or Valentine, and she had not thought of a satisfactory response, when Helena continued, as though the answer was not worth waiting for, or she had mentally forestalled it.

“You and I have not seen a great deal lately of Valentine,” she continued—she had learned long ago to speak of him by his Christian name to the mother—“but we have thought of him none the less. He has been eccentric and hard to understand,” she added; “he kept away when I first came, then he came more frequently; lastly he hid from both of us again, as a man egregiously vain might do who was prone to take offence at petty trifles that ruffled his self-esteem, but your son was never vain. Once in

the very early days when you and I were better friends——”

“Oh, not that!” cried Mrs. Merrick, and the tears welled suddenly to her eyes at the reproof conveyed in the words that were innocently meant.

“You used to talk of Valentine to me,” she continued, “to ask my advice, and tell me that his absence troubled you; but all that passed away by degrees, and we came down to this.”

“And this?” said Mrs. Merrick, as the fair hand stole from hers and clasped its fellow as if in sympathy.

“And this is hardly confidence if we have both a secret that we do not share with each other.”

Mrs. Merrick winced.

“I seem to have wandered from the subject, mamma, but I have not,” Helena continued. “Fortunately mine is not a long story, and will not try your patience a great deal. I called at your son’s chambers this morning, as you feared” —Mrs. Merrick winced again—“and I bade him good-bye, as I felt that I had a right to do.”

“Why did you not accompany me?”

“I preferred to go alone,” was the quiet an-

swer. "It was highly indiscreet, the world tells me; and I met the world outside his rooms, standing with its arms upraised in horror at my indiscretion."

It was the first ring of satire that had escaped Helena in that house—her first protest, since Mrs. Merrick's acquaintance with her, against society's uncharitableness; and there was a scornfulness in her voice which told of a strong deep nature, that a great wrong or a great kindness was capable of stirring into action.

"You met the world?" repeated Mrs. Merrick, dreamily.

"In the person of the Andisons—mother, son, and daughter—all equally shocked at my unwomanly behaviour, and equally distracted by curiosity as to the reasons for a conduct not regulated by those strict rules of etiquette by which natures more refined are governed."

"You are severe," said Mrs. Merrick, sadly. "I did not think that you could speak in this way, or satirize me."

"Oh, to you I can tell everything," said Helena, quickly; "and it is not you whom I satirize. You have the right to know, but they have not."

“Not Florence?”

“Florence might have trusted me more, and been less easily disturbed. But she is young,” she added, thoughtfully, “and I do not blame her much.”

“Then you blame me, Helena, after all?”

“Why, you have said nothing, and suspected nothing!” exclaimed Helena; “and you know less of me than Florence Andison does.”

“Impossible!”

“You have been content, mamma, to take me upon credit,” she said, quietly, “to believe in all that I said, and to close your honest eyes against any disguise that it has pleased me to assume; and, after all, it is an impostor whom you have loved.”

“Helena!”

“I have not told you everything. There was no use in that till now, and there was an end gained in keeping back a truth.”

“It is impossible for me to comprehend you,” said Mrs. Merrick, despairingly.

“I wander a little,” answered Helena; “but then this is another epoch in my life from which dates many changes, and you will excuse my incoherence. I am never of one mind long, and

the spell or the curse of unrest is on me once again. I can no more resist it," she said, "than the straw in the stream can help driving on with the current. And I go on—oh, my mamma!—away from your loving shelter and this peaceful home, just as you prophesied that I should!"

The hand stole forth again and clasped the elder woman's, as if for counsel, or strength, or protection, and Mrs. Merrick breathed hard in her surprise, and could not find a voice wherewith to answer. Helena continued—

"I went to the Temple, to your son, ostensibly on business connected with my money—of what might become of it—of what might become of me, if a suspicion that I had were true, and yet caring not in my heart for my money or myself. Don't look shocked, mamma; I have almost lived out my little part. Floy understood that it was with this object that I had sought her lover, and that I had told him, as I tell you now, mamma, that he need not hide away on his return, fearing to meet me as he has done. That here I should not be—a phantom between him and his mother, keeping them apart."

“My dear Helena—you said that! You told Valentine that! And he?—oh! what did he say?”

“He seemed to expect it,” was the slow answer. “He gave me a few kind words—he is always very kind; he spoke of his respect, his esteem, of the friend I was to you, of the wildness of my conceit that would make him the excuse for all my hasty projects, but I hardly listened. I had heard much of it before, and I knew that he would spare me, come here at any cost to himself, even, if he thought that he could deceive my judgment, and render me and you the happier by so doing.”

“But why should his keeping away from Richmond lead you to frame this resolution to leave me?”

“He will come when I am gone. You will see him frequently.”

“Can I not see him now?” was the inquiry.

“I am in the way. Sometimes I even think, mamma, that you have told him not to come where I am.”

Mrs. Merrick was only a woman, after all, and could not own to this, or to her motive for it. The red blushes mounted to her face in her

confusion, but Helena was not looking at her.

“You may have seen the struggle with his will, and sought to spare him the ordeal of facing one whom he disliked. You may have told him for my own sake, seeking to spare me?”

Helena looked at her then, and Mrs. Merrick found courage to meet the big dark eyes, and even to shake her head, as if in protest against the wild thoughts of the speaker.

“May you not?” asked Helena, as if determined on an answer to her last suggestion.

“My dear child, why should I wish to spare you?” said Mrs. Merrick, driven at last to a reply.

“To spare me the pain of meeting him, I mean.”

“Did you dislike him then so much?” asked Mrs. Merrick in surprise again.

“I dared not tell you this until now, but I—I love him! Oh, how I love him!”

The truth was out at last, and the young widow was sobbing in the arms of the other as though her heart might break with the revelation that had escaped it. Mrs. Merrick was unprepared for this; with all her shrewdness,

Helena's quiet manner had deceived her, and she had not read her secret as she had read her son's. Helena Barclay's had been a greater victory over self than Val's had been.

"I am sorry, Helena; I did not think—I did not guess—— Oh, my poor child, what made you think of him?" cried Mrs. Merrick, smoothing the glossy hair of the head buried on her breast, as if by the action she might impart a faint degree of comfort to her, and Helena was a child whom a few kind caresses might wean from her distress.

"He was a strong, earnest man, and I was very weak; I loved him at first because you did, and at last because I knew his value. They were very, very happy days when he came here more often. I shall never forget them—I shall always treasure their memory."

"But——"

"But he will never guess at my affection, and you will never tell him. This is between us for life; and you see now how it is the wiser course that I should go away."

Mrs. Merrick did not answer, but Helena took her silence for consent.

"I go for my own sake, for he can never be

anything to me. I should not love him half as well as I do ; I should not constitute him the hero of my fancies, if he were not immeasurably above me, and faithfully in love with that fair girl whose innocent face I saw to-day, I would not marry him," she said earnestly, "to cast the blight of my past upon him, for the world, and even if he loved me very deeply. I am too proud of his welfare, and too proud of him. So, mamma, some day, without another foolish scene like this, to spare me and you the agony of a parting I could not bear, I shall disappear ; and when I am my old staid self you shall hear from Helena Barclay."

"Oh, my dear Helena, I wish that you had not told me."

"You will think the better of me for not going away with so great a secret shut up in my heart, you will understand me now completely when other folk are wondering. Remember again," she added, looking up with a brighter smile, as if her confession had already made her happier, "that I could not keep this secret from one who never hid anything from me."

Mrs. Merrick bent her head and quivered beneath Helena's kisses. If Helena only knew

the truth—if Val could only guess half of it in his turn—if the fair-haired Baronet's daughter had not lived, or Val had not pledged himself in honour to her—what a different ending to a story which must close in solemn sadness over a life that had been misconstrued with terrible injustice !

Mrs. Merrick was a proud woman—she would prefer her son's unhappiness to his breaking his word—before everything in this wicked world, the word of a Merrick ! She could say nothing in comfort—she sat stunned, and, presently, when Helena said in a low voice, “Good night,” she echoed back “Good night,” in return, as though glad to be left alone with her own bitterness of spirit.

Helena went to her room, knowing not how the hours had passed, or whether it was late or early. Her own watch had run down, and there was no timepiece in the room, but she thought by the look of the night, at which she drew the blind aside to gaze, that it was very late. All was still without, the night was dark, the stars had gone in, as if each had been a hope of Helena Barclay's, and had died out according to the rule governing her life, the gar-

den looked as bleak and barren beneath her as her future, and the Thames flowed on beyond it, a black swift river making for the sea's immensity and mystery.

Suddenly she dropped the blind and went backwards with her hands to her temples, a woman scared by a vision that lurked there in the shadows of the night. The vision of Val Merrick—the man she had feared and loved—it was he or his ghost standing beneath her window with a wild, white face upturned to the light which shimmered faintly on it, and yet every lineament traced out so clearly that she could have sworn to his identity.

“Helena!” murmured a voice, in the low deep tones she knew so well, and she was conscious then that in the garden below her, and for some strange new reason beyond her power to decipher, there waited for her the man who had become the ruling agent of her life.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

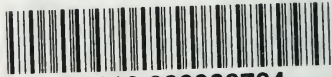




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